

## lucky charm

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/27648536) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/27648536>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Teen And Up Audiences</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Category:	<a href="#">M/M</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Minecraft (Video Game)</a> , <a href="#">Video Blogging RPF</a>
Relationship:	<a href="#">Clay   Dream/GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF)</a>
Character:	<a href="#">Clay   Dream (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Darryl Noveschosch</a> , <a href="#">Zak Ahmed</a> , <a href="#">Karl Jacobs</a> , <a href="#">TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Toby Smith   Tubbo</a> , <a href="#">Niki   Nihachu</a> , <a href="#">Wilbur Soot</a> , <a href="#">Eret (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Alexis   Quackity</a> , <a href="#">Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Corpse Husband (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Sykkuno (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Rachel "Rae" Hofstetter</a> , <a href="#">Captain Puffy (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Callahan (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Floris   Fundy</a> , <a href="#">Minx   JustAMinx (Video Blogging RPF)</a> , <a href="#">Ponk   DropsByPonk (Video Blogging RPF)</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Alternate Universe - Medieval</a> , <a href="#">Alternate Universe - Royalty</a> , <a href="#">Hurt/Comfort</a> , <a href="#">Angst</a> , <a href="#">Fluff</a> , <a href="#">Enemies to Friends to Lovers</a> , <a href="#">Pining</a> , <a href="#">Platonic Cuddling</a> , <a href="#">Sharing a Bed</a> , <a href="#">GeorgeNotFound Is An Idiot</a> , <a href="#">Clay   Dream Is An Idiot</a> , <a href="#">Clover motif</a> , <a href="#">Tags May Change</a> , <a href="#">Angst with a Happy Ending</a> , <a href="#">Fluff and Angst</a> , <a href="#">Slow Burn</a> , <a href="#">Requited Love</a> , <a href="#">Alternate Universe - Magic</a>
Language:	English
Collections:	<a href="#">I love these fics</a> , <a href="#">dnf fanfics (mcyt)</a> , <a href="#">AHHHH i need to finish these fics</a> , <a href="#">BEST FICS collection!! yum fics for the soul</a>
Stats:	Published: 2020-11-20 Updated: 2021-04-04 Chapters: 20/? Words: 123994

## lucky charm

by [kath\\_trashh](#)

### Summary

George has had bad luck before.

He's stubbed his toes on doors, dropped heavy pounds onto his feet, nearly cut open his fingers trying to cut potatoes-- but nothing like this. Nothing in his life can compare to the misfortune of having *just been crowned king*.

---

In which George, down on his luck, is crowned king and meets Dream, the luckiest knight in the world.

### Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](#)

# Chapter 1

Consciousness comes to George slowly. He opens his heavy eyelids, raising his arm slowly to rub the sleep from his eyes, blinking hard. It's taking all his willpower not to fall back onto the bed and go back to sleep. He hears a passerine chirp outside, and the sound sharpens his senses bit by bit. He flexes his weak fingers, feeling his grip tighten.

"Good morning to me, I guess," George says to himself.

Light filters in from the window, illuminating dust motes in the air. George swings his legs off the bed, standing up to stretch.

It's a little over an hour before dawn. "Time to get to work," George murmurs to himself.

There are several things he has to do each day to maintain his way of life, which are as follows:

1. Feed the chickens
2. Eat breakfast
3. Obtain water from the creek
4. Head into town to trade away feathers, string, and wool in exchange for his necessities
5. Chop wood
6. Sharpen his tools
7. And a multitude of other things that have to be done to maintain his life each day.

It's hard, tedious work, but George enjoys it nonetheless. Because it's constant, and it hasn't ever changed.

George reasons that if he had friends or people he liked interacting with, maybe it could add variety to his life.

But he doesn't really have friends.

Not that he's lonely or anything.

It's just that he prefers isolation, *chooses* to be alone.

It's better this way, in a small house on the edge of town where nobody can bother him and he can live out his days in peace.

He digs his hand into the bag of seeds, throwing some out to the chickens as he sits down on his porch, watching them peck away.

After a minute, he stands back up to go towards the chicken coop, picking out a few of the eggs and returning to his house to gather up the goods he'd be trading away.

George hums a little as he works, a folk song that he no longer remembers the lyrics to.

He takes a bite of bread.

It tastes dry on his tongue, and George will be the first to admit he's not an *excellent* baker, but the point is that he's trying, and he's gotta at least eat something before he starves to death. After all, the prices of the bread in the market are far too high to be worthwhile, and as much as George wanted to get a taste of softer bread that didn't nearly crack his teeth, he was also unwilling to trade half of his materials in for it.

He continues to hum cheerfully, swinging two heavy iron buckets from shoulder to shoulder as he heads for the riverbank.

The earth is muddier than usual-- oversaturated with greens and yellows, not that he could see them anyway. Drops of rain from the night before are still visible on the leaves and the grass. The air feels slightly humid, almost sticking to George's skin. The smell of petrichor cleared his head.

"It's just rained," George murmurs, not to anyone around him in particular, but mostly to himself. He has to at least talk to *someone*, right? "Hopefully the river isn't full of debris."

Luckily for him, it's not; it's more tranquil than he's seen it in a while. As he leans down to fill the buckets, he lets his mind float away from him, like a leaf floating down the river stream. He finds a clover in the grass, plucks it up, runs his fingers across the leaves.

“When the clover flowers come in, maybe I’ll be able to get some honey to sweeten my bread or something,” George decides. “Or maybe I could trade it...? Gods, I’d have to learn how to maintain a beehive, though--”

He decides to table that for another day, as the sun rises higher into the sky.

He leans over his wooden table, notching off fetching water from the creek.

Grasping the rough charcoal pencil, he hastily writes out, *Make sure to boil one bucket of water for tea.*

George knows his life like he knows the back of his hand. Because it’s familiar, and it never changes. Even if there’s a scratch or two in it, it heals up quickly and looks about the same as it ever does immediately after.

His motions are practiced as he gathers up the supplies he needs for the market: a bag of feathers, wool, and string; a basket of chicken eggs he’d picked from the chicken coop; and a spare burlap sack to carry any of his other materials.

“I’m heading off,” George says to his silent, empty house. He hoists the heavy bag and basket onto his shoulders and heads off for the market.

The town of Somnium isn’t very big-- as a border territory in the Kingdom of Fortuna, it’s frequently ignored and is subject to the fewest protections possible, given that the king-- George always scoffs in his head when he has to think about the bastard— didn’t want to spread his forces out and protect every piece of land.

*A fat lot of good that does him,* George thinks.

He doesn’t say that one out loud.

It’s treason to speak against the king, after all.

George is familiar with everyone in the marketplace, and they don’t often strike a hard bargain. He trades most of the feathers for coal and oil, the wool for cloth and soap and needles, the eggs for ingredients such as wheat, sugar, potatoes. He tucks the materials away in his bags and basket,

exchanging greetings with some of the townspeople as he heads out.

“George, lovely weather we’re having, right?” a woman asks cheerfully.

“Oh, yeah,” George says. “Hi, Mags. How’s the kid?”

“He’s growing up just fine,” Mags says in response. “He keeps telling me he wants to be on the royal guard when he grows up. Isn’t that just the sweetest thing?”

George scoffs. *How nice it must be, George thinks, to not have to worry about the royal family. To be able to just-- so easily--*

It’s jealousy, George realizes.

The kid, a chubby-cheeked boy, probably no older than three, stumbles out of the house to hug George’s leg. George nearly drops his sack of potatoes, but he laughs a little to lean down and squeeze the boy’s cheek.

“Hey, little guy. Be more careful-- if I wasn’t stronger, I would’ve dropped the bag and crushed you.”

The boy puffs out his cheeks, and George laughs.

“Just you watch,” the boy says. “I’m going to become the biggest, *best* guard in the castle. And then I can get me and my mom out of this place.”

George’s smile grows a little bitter. There’s a bitter aftertaste in there somewhere, like coffee-- *gods*, how long has it been since he’s tasted it? He doesn’t even like coffee-- remembers the last time that he tried to drink it, he’d spit out the bitter liquid.

George shakes his head.

“It’s good to dream,” George says instead.

He used to dream, once.

He doesn't think he much does that anymore.

The path back to his house is long.

The town of Somnium is already at the farthest point of the kingdom-- but George's house is even farther than that. George has had more than one townspeople speak to him about the distance he has to travel to enter the town: wasn't it far? Didn't he get tired? During the intense heat and drought, how did he manage to come into town? More than once, he got a package from a concerned mother containing a few materials that they thought would have helped him.

He feels vaguely irritated by it all. He appreciates their care, of course-- but he's not a child anymore.

The forest isn't ever silent, not with the rustling of woodland creatures and the crunch of twigs and leaves against the ground-- but George hums to himself as he balances the heavy sacks upon his arms.

His house is built into a small hill, enveloped by the forest canopy surrounding it. The exterior of the house is fortified by dark oak leaves, blind columns supporting its curved structure. The walls of the house are made out of a cream-colored stone-- or was it clay? George doesn't quite remember the specifics anymore.

He does remember carving out the hole at the top of the house with his mother, the tree roots acting as the roof to keep the house from falling.

The door is red.

Or well, he remembers his father saying that it should be red. *"It'll be easier to see from far away,"* he remembers his father saying, a stripe of what should have been red paint across his nose. Not that George can see it. To him, it just looks like any old wooden door.

George grasps the handle of the door, opening it up and entering the house.

“I’m back,” George says to no one in particular.

Once again, there’s no response.

George drops off the heavy burlap sacks against the wall and leaves his empty basket on the table. He picks up his charcoal pencil.

He scratches *visiting town* off the list.

“I think I can rest for a bit,” George says to the silent house. “Before I go and chop some firewood... it’s going to be getting cold soon, and--”

He hears something.

It sounds like the rattling of a carriage, and George stands up cautiously. He reaches for the sword propped against the far wall-- a last resort at this point.

*I’ve never used this one before*, George thinks.

But in the worst-case scenario, if his house was getting stormed... he’d at least pretend to put up a good fight.

He hears a knock on the door.

*Tap.*

*Tap.*

*Tap.*

*Okay, so they’re not bandits*, George thinks. A bandit probably would’ve kicked the door down.



Right? He's never been robbed before because the people in this town were nice to him, so this is entirely new. He shifts towards his window, pushing open one of the embroidered curtains cautiously.

He has to pause for a second.

He's not quite sure what he's seeing— but if his vision is serving him correctly, *and he hopes it isn't*— there's a royal carriage outside his door. Or well, he thinks it should be-- it's a rather understated caravan, but the clover detailing on the side, barely discreet, shows that it has to be. A man is standing outside of his door, clearly uncomfortable in common clothes.

George isn't even sure who it is.

*Should I even answer the door?*

He keeps the sword in view so he can grab it if he needs to.

Then he opens the door.

“Uh, hello?” George asks.

The man looks down at George as if he's not quite sure how to begin the conversation.

“Hello,” the man says.

George's brow twitches.

“What are you doing here?” George asks.

“You're-- you're George, right?” the man asks.

“Yes?” George says, phrasing it like a question. *What the hell is going on here? Am I in trouble? I’ve kept my head down all this time--*

“Oh, sweet. Uh, okay...” the man reaches into his pockets and pulls out a scroll. It looks like it’s made of finer parchment than the kind George uses for his notes-- and the man breaks the wax seal binding the scroll together. He clears his throat. “As of this moment, you have been crowned the King of the Kingdom of Fortuna.”

George thinks his heart stops beating. Just for an instant. He feels blood rushing to his ears.

It’s like his breath has been caught in his lungs before it can come out.

Then it does.

“ *WHAT?* ”

George hears the surrounding woods go silent as if he startled all the fauna with his scream.

“It’s a lot to process, I. I guess?” the man says awkwardly. “But all that aside, you’re going to have to come with us to the castle.”

George has had bad luck before.

He’s stubbed his toes on doors, dropped heavy pounds onto his feet, nearly cut open his fingers trying to cut potatoes-- but nothing like this. Nothing in his life can compare to the misfortune of having *just been crowned king*.

George lashes out as soon as the man attempts to put a hand on him.

He’s--

Not good at throwing punches. If he had his ax on him, maybe he’d have been able to do *anything* - - but the man catches his fist before it can even make contact with anything.

“Uh,” the man says, his voice now pitching into a higher panic. “Listen, I-I know it’s like, a lot to take in. Commoner being crowned king, blah-blah-blah, rarely happens, a turn of the century thing, yadda-yadda, but like. I-I kinda promised my boss that I’d bring you back to the palace in one piece... and he’s *kind of* going to like. Fire me if I don’t bring you back. So *please* --”

“I don’t want to have *anything* to do with the monarchy, much less be *crowned king* , so your boss can kiss my ass--” George snarls.

“ *Oh,* ” the man squeaks out. “Well, i-in any case, I still can’t leave until you-you come with me, so please--”

“So is the king dead?” George blurts out. He’d developed his suspicions as soon as the man... seemingly declared him king, but he didn’t believe it.

“Uh- yeah, he, he is,” the man says nervously. “That’s why we’re- we’re crowning you.”

“Wait-- like, *actually* ? Didn’t he have kids? I’m sure there are more qualified people to do the job than *me* ,” George protests. He feels a wave of irritation washing over him, and he clenches his fist. “So why me?”

“I-I’m not allowed to answer that!” the man stammers.

“You’re *not allowed*? What kind of excuse is that?” George shouts.

“Look, I-I promise we can give you a better explanation at the palace, but for now you-you have to come with me,” the man squeaks out.

“I’m not going *anywhere* with you,” George says angrily, trying to wrestle his arm out of the man’s grip. For how nervous the man is, his grip still holds strong. “Let me *go* before I make you regret touching me altogether.” George reaches for the sword he’d left-leaning on the wall, gripping it tightly in his free hand.

“Oh, Gods,” the man says. He sounds like he’s on the edge of tears. “Dream-- DREAM! Come help me!”

“Damn, Ranboo,” George hears a faint voice calling. “We’ve got a feisty one, huh?”

“DREAM,” the man now known to George as Ranboo screams. “Please don’t make fun of me-- I’m *scared* -- this wasn’t on the job description--”

“Alright, alright.” A man steps out of the carriage.

He’s a knight for sure. George can tell by the glint of the light armor, detailed with the clover emblem of the royal family. As he draws closer, George finds the man’s eyes are crinkled with amusement, green eyes glittering with barely-hidden mirth.

“Sorry about this, Your Highness,” Dream-- was that the name Ranboo had screamed?-- says. It sounds like he’s on the verge of laughing.

*Sorry? About what?*

George is about to open his mouth to protest, but he feels a sudden blunt force at the back of his neck.

And then his vision goes dark.

## Chapter 2

### Chapter Summary

The carriage shifts to a halt and George nearly falls forward. Dream presses a hand square on George's chest, keeping him from crashing his face against the ground. Ranboo fumbles with the door, opening and jumping out of the carriage, unfurling a set of stairs as he goes. Dream moves out of the carriage, holding out his hand to George.

George ignores it.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Consciousness comes to George painfully. First, it starts with a tingling in his fingers, then his toes. Then his achy arms and legs, jostling every time there's a minuscule bump on the road. Had-- had the two people, what were their names-- *Dream and Ranboo* -- had they shoved him onto the carriage while he was--

While he...

George's head throbs.

*Hurts too much to think*, George thinks resolutely.

George cracks open his eyes. Just a smidge.

The carriage has windows, so it's not as if he can't see anything. The light illuminates his surroundings in a pale, yellow glow. Judging by the faint glimpse of the outside, they have to be in town by now, on their way to--

*"As of this moment, you have been crowned the King of the Kingdom of Fortuna."*

Is *that* what had been said?

Maybe it was just a bad dream or something.

A nightmare, a figment of his imagination borne out of stress. But that couldn't make sense, because he's not even particularly stressed about anything. Is he? Maybe the fact that he was questioning it now, wedged in some strange, uncomfortable position in the back of a carriage.

George squeezes his eyes shut again, trying to drift back to unconsciousness.

It doesn't work.

He hears soft, pointed whispering coming from across him.

"... bound to be at the castle soon," says a voice. If George remembers correctly, that voice belongs to Ranboo. "How mad do you think Bad will be that you, like, knocked his lights out..."

"Mad," is the response, followed by a painful wheeze. It sounds like a collapsing lung, or a particularly annoying tea kettle. George doesn't know why he feels a strange prick of irritation blooming across his brow. That should be Dream, though.

George opens his eyes fully, fluttering his eyelids a little as he pulls himself into a sitting position. Now that he can properly take a look at the insides of the carriage, he realizes he'd been placed into a strange, half-lying down, half-seated pose where most of his back would have been pressed uncomfortably against one of the doors of the carriage. *That explains the cramps*, George thinks bitterly.

"Ah!" Dream says. "You're finally awake, Your Highness."

George cocks his head.

And then he realizes, all at once.

"You guys kidnapped me." George says bluntly.

Dream wheezes a little.

“Well, you were being difficult,” Dream says, his voice taking an amused edge.

“You *knocked me out!* ” George shouts. He nearly tries to stand up in the carriage, to tackle this-- this *asshole* with the smuggest grin across his face, and then the carriage rocks a little, and George nearly stumbles forward. Dream quickly grabs the door handle for stability as he reaches a hand up to grab George as well. Ranboo sits across from them, knuckles white from gripping the seat in panic over the state of their carriage.

“Look, I know you’re mad,” Dream says casually, pushing George back into the carriage seat, “but we’ve got an explanation for this. Ranboo?”

“Err- so, here’s the b-basic rundown: the king’s... dead. And since he left no viable of-age heirs, we had to do some digging down the family trees and found that you were of-age and able to take the throne. And I-I think that’s it?” Ranboo scratches his head, running a hand over his face. “I uh- I’m not qualified for this-- look, uh. The Royal Archivist is, like, your best bet at an explanation here? I don’t wanna mess up any details and he’ll definitely be there to welcome you so just... ask him, man.”

“That-that didn’t justify you *KNOCKING ME OUT!* ” George shouts, louder this time. He’s rising out of his seat again, *damn* whatever Dream was going to do next--

“Woah there, *princess-* ” Dream reached a hand up to shove George back down into his seat again. “Unless you wanna keep us rocking off the path forever, stay sitting. God, seems like that beauty rest wasn’t enough to stop you from being insanely melodramatic about-”

George doesn’t even think.

All he can feel is the stinging sensation of his palm and sees Dream raising a hand to his cheek, touching at a red spot on his cheekbone.

“Oh c’mon, really?” Dream asks, half in-awe and half... sounding very, very pissed. “I know I’m a disposable unit at this point, Your *Highness* , but that didn’t need to be done.”

Ranboo looks like he’s about to have a heart attack.

“I don’t get paid enough for this. The late king already took my paid vacations,” Ranboo whispers under his breath like a rapid-fire prayer.

Dream leans in closer, presses a hand to George’s shoulder. It feels like an iron brand, like Dream could just burn George’s skin right through his clothes.

“Look,” Dream whispers into George’s ear.

His voice sounds like the beginnings of a forest fire. Like a match scraping against the rough.

“I know we’re on a rocky first impression here,” Dream murmurs. “But between you and me? I’d say for the time being you calm down. I wouldn’t try running either. We’ve already been on the road for an hour, so you have nowhere to run.”

“Settling for petty threats? I knew the royal court was low, but I didn’t think you stooped *that* low,” George snaps in response.

Dream laughs darkly.

“Watch your tongue, Your Highness,” Dream whispers. “You’re part of it now, too.”

“Well, once we’re in the castle, I guess I won’t have to see you around,” George says in response. “I’ve heard it’s a pretty big area.”

Dream... doesn’t even laugh. He draws his hand away, sitting back down with a complacent smirk on his lips.

George feels a prick of irritation.

He doesn’t like the way Dream’s looking at him, as if he’s an insect to be observed under a magnifying glass, as if he’s *beneath* Dream.

“What’s with that look?” George asks, his curiosity getting the better of him now.



“Nothing, Your Highness,” Dream chirps.

George realizes Dream no longer has any intentions of answering him.

And it pisses him off.

He resolves himself to just looking out the window, watching the carriages bustle by in the center of Fortuna. People’s brows are sterner, their expressions harder. They’re dressed in velvets and silks, hardly any of them stopping for a conversation with the local fruit and vegetable sellers. More than once he sees a small child with dirt-caked hands peddling for coins or even a spare glance to no avail. The people simply bustle ahead, as if they have more important things to do.

*Like what? George wonders bitterly. Like walking around, pretending they’re better than the rest of us? Basking in their riches as if it makes them better than the rest of us?*

*Not like when they die they’ll be able to take their wealth with them.*

George despises the royal family for that.

For their moral superiority; just by the nature of having been born royal, they demanded the respect of everyone else with nary a good reason.

At least he wasn’t like that. At least his parents had taught him differently— that respect had to be earned, no matter who it was from. Whether you were royalty or not.

George watches a small family bustling by— a child holding their father and mother’s hands, swinging from their arms. He feels a twinge of something bittersweet— he remembers barely being able to touch the ground when his parents did that— and shoves it down. The last thing he needs to do right now is getting too stuck reminiscing about the past.

“... ness,” he hears a voice say. George wasn’t even aware he’d managed to get so stuck in his own thoughts.

“Your Highness... ugh, *Your Highness* !”

It’s Dream.

George pretends not to pay attention.

Dream sounds more frustrated by the second.

“Your Highness, we’re here,” Dream says, enunciating every word like it’s paining him to say it.

“Oh,” George says casually. “Are we?”

Dream’s brow twitches.

George tries not to feel like he’s somehow been vindicated.

He fails miserably.

The carriage shifts to a halt and George nearly falls forward. Dream presses a hand square on George’s chest, keeping him from crashing his face against the ground. Ranboo fumbles with the door, opening and jumping out of the carriage, unfurling a set of stairs as he goes. Dream moves out of the carriage, holding out his hand to George.

George ignores it.

The moment he steps on the hard earth, his knees nearly buckle. His vision swims, and he almost feels like he’s going to throw up. George hasn’t felt this way since the one time he went canoeing with his parents and managed to swim right into a rapid. He’d nearly puked. Is it road-sickness? Is that what it was called? George isn’t too sure. He’s never felt like this before.

Dream manages to capture his side, throwing George’s arm over his shoulder. George tries *really, really* hard not to collapse all of his weight into Dream-- it’d make him come off weak, and the last thing he wants to be seen as is *weak* .

“You good there, princess?” Dream asks mockingly.

George rolls his eyes.

“Fuck off,” George retorts.

The sun is just about to set, George realizes. *Have I been out for that long?* He remembered it was just after noon when he returned to his cottage. *Time passes quickly when you don't pay attention, I guess.*

His eyes move up to look over the castle. It's not very modest by any means-- a cream-colored facade and turrets with blue roofs. There're more windows on the palace than he's ever seen windows on any building before-- the light filters through them, and he's sure if he could see the full range of colors, he would've said it was beautiful. Ethereal, almost. He sees guards pacing the battlements-- from this view, they look tiny, like little wooden toy soldiers. The castle's main entrance, from this far-- he's sure it looks like any old wooden door, dark and imperceptible.

He thinks the castle should be bigger.

He'd always thought of the castle like it was some-- some monolith, some dark building where the royal family just cackled. But now that he's looking at it, it looks... almost welcoming.

“There's a bit of a walk,” Dream says. “You sure you're good to continue walking?”

“I'm fine,” George says, rolling his eyes.

“If you're so fine, try walking on your own, Your Highness,” Dream says.

George... does not. He's got enough self-awareness to realize that his limbs are still almost jelly-like, barely able to keep himself standing. If it wasn't for Dream holding him up, he'd probably be on the ground.

“That's what I thought,” Dream hums triumphantly.

The walk from the initial drop-off point to the main entrance of the palace is dotted with trees and bushes with flowers. Some of the flowers George can recognize. Others look strange, in mottled shades of yellow and blue that George is sure look beautiful, but he can't be bothered to ask what the colors actually are. A songbird chirps from its perch on a tree.

It's not a passerine, George realizes.

He doesn't know why he focuses so much on it. Maybe it's because he's now farther from home. He's out of his element for real, now.

There's a man standing on the steps.

He's standing there, hands laced together in front of him. Occasionally the man extricates one of his hands to adjust his glasses or tug at his sleeve edge, but he just stands there. Waiting. George has half a mind to be creeped out. But once the man's eyes fixate on Ranboo, Dream, and George making their way up the path, he brightens up.

He begins to sprint at the three, and George is almost alarmed at just how quickly the man runs. It seems half out of excitement, half out of impatience. As he draws a bit closer, his expression... shifts.

It almost happens in slow motion.

Upon fixing his eyes upon George's-- general disposition, George supposes, he probably looks awful-- his face morphs into one of... actual horror.

"Oh my goodness, what did you *do* to him," the man mutters-- low enough that he could claim he was saying it under his breath, but loud enough that George still heard it anyways. He coughs a little, panting for breath. "No matter, I suppose. He's here at least... I was worried he wouldn't come. How did you manage it?"

Ranboo... turns his head away.

"Yeah, uh. About that, Bad," Dream says.

"They knocked me out," George says bluntly. He doesn't feel like letting Dream blather on and

make excuses.

“They-- they... they-wh, oh my heavens, in Fortuna’s *name* , you *knocked him out?!* ” the man now known as Bad (what was that name, what was *any* of these people’s names in the palace) exclaims in utter shock.

“Well, I wouldn’t have done it if I didn’t *need* to,” Dream protests.

“Dream!” Bad says. “That’s *the king* you knocked out!”

“Well... to be fair, he wasn’t the king when I knocked him out. But he’s king now and I won’t do it again,” Dream says, shrugging a little. “We brought him in, didn’t we? The end justifies the means, that kind of deal.”

Bad pinches his brow.

“Oh my goodness,” Bad whispers. “This is just a mess, isn’t it...” Bad looks up, claps his hands firmly. “Alright, well. Despite... the rocky start, at least you’ve been acquainted with your knight-  
\_”

Dream snorts a little at that.

“Wait. Hold on. My- my *what?* ” George stammers out.

“Your-your knight,” Bad says, gesturing at Dream. “He-he’s... your knight. Did he... not make you aware of that?”

“No? The fuck?” George splutters.

“ *Language* ,” Bad says warningly.

George is... absolutely flabbergasted.

“Well, Your Highness. Isn’t this your lucky day,” Dream says with a hint of amusement. He doesn’t even have the courtesy to sound genuine about it.

“Also, what happened to your *face* , Dream?” Bad asks. “It’s...” Bad gestures to his own cheek. “You’re kind of puffy, right around here.”

“Mm...” Dream reaches up to touch the tender spot that George had slapped. “I ran into a tree.”

Ranboo scoffs, rolling his eyes.

“You-you what?” Bad stammers. “You *ran* into a *tree* ? How could that have happened?” Upon Dream’s inscrutable look in response, Bad takes a deep breath. “Okay, well... that’s not important right now. Please follow me, Your Highness.”

Bad turns to head into the palace, pulling open the large wooden door with some effort.

He holds it out long enough to let Dream, George, and Ranboo through the door before letting it close with a loud thud. George feels like he’s been locked into a gilded prison. But there’s nothing he can do about it now-- he’s stuck here and he feels far too sick to move.

“Well, uh,” Ranboo says nervously. “I’m going to- yeah, I’m just gonna go. See you later, Dream. Your Highness.” Ranboo salutes shakily before bowing and then running off into the palace.

Bad watches Ranboo disappear deeper into the palace for some time, right up until his footsteps are inaudible. He turns back to George and Dream, a somewhat uncertain smile on his face.

“Alright,” Bad says. “Well... I think we should head to the dining hall. It’s a bit late, so there won’t be many people... we’ll draw less attention.”

“No, I think we should go to his room,” Dream says. “Look at him; he’s barely standing right now. What makes you think he’d even be able to *sit* in the dining hall without keeling over?”

“W-well, maybe he’s hungry,” Bad tries.

“I am not,” George says. “Don’t talk about me like I’m not here.”

Bad laughs nervously, tugging at his collar.

“Apologies, Your Highness. It’s a bit of an... archivist tendency,” Bad says. “Let’s go to your room. It’s a bit of a walk, though, I’m afraid. Are you sure you’re alright? Dream could probably car--”

“No, no. I’m good,” George gets out through gritted teeth.

“Well, as long as you’re sure. Feel free to ask for assistance at any moment, though,” Bad says, and turns to head up the stairs.

Dream fixes George with a bemused look.

“What. Are. You. Looking. At,” George grits out.

“Well, I wouldn’t be against carrying you,” Dream teases.

“Say that one more time and your face might get a little ‘puffier’,” George mocks. Dream’s face hardens a little, and he yanks George’s arm so it’s more squarely placed across his shoulder, and they begin to climb up the stairs.

George is a little humiliated, honestly, that he’s so dependent on Dream to help him up the stairs. He’s not sure whether it was the carriage ride, getting knocked out, or just the exhaustion and stress of the day that’s making him so weak. Maybe it was a combination of everything. As they climb, Bad begins to speak.

“So, I don’t know how much Ranboo briefed you on as you were heading to the castle-- probably not much...” Bad says. “But the king is dead. I-I think he died of a heart attack? I’m not sure-- they wouldn’t let me do an autopsy for the records. But I did some digging in the royal archives, perused lineages and whatnot-- and I found this... old family tree? I don’t know how I would’ve missed it... it had your name on it, though, as a distant cousin. And I figured you were of-age, because the other option would have been Tubbo, your cousin, and he’s not old enough--”

“My-my what?” George asks, for maybe the second time that day. “My cousin? I don’t-I don’t *have* cousins, or any extended family for that matter.”

Bad just turns around to look at George with pity in his eyes.

“Well, you do now,” Bad says resolutely. “Your other cousin, Niki *is* of age, but the royal court wouldn’t have cooperated with her. Something about women not being fit to rule, though I think that’s ridiculous.” Bad turns to continue heading forward.

“So, you were our best option. We’re here.”

Bad stops abruptly, gesturing to a set of double doors. They’ve been painted blue with glimmering accents in gold.

“Thank you for leading the way,” George says. It feels like his tongue weighs far too heavily in his mouth-- words hard to say and far too clumsy. Bad smiles reassuringly.

“Not a problem, Your Highness. I’ll be seeing you around tomorrow. You have a big day ahead of you.” Bad bows promptly before walking off.

George waits until he can’t hear Bad’s footsteps anymore to speak.

The knight-- *his* knight doesn’t leave.

“What the hell are you waiting for?” George asks, looking at Dream.

Dream snorts again.

“Regrettably, this is also my room,” Dream says, reaching to tug one of the handles.

George’s mouth goes ajar.

“Wait, so-- we’re, are we...”

“Yeah,” Dream says smartly. “Don’t worry, the bed is pretty big.”



The first thing George can notice is the bed. It's the biggest bed he's ever seen-- full of pillows and smooth sheets. He doesn't doubt that they're made of silk, either. The lace canopy draping over the bed reminds him of a wedding veil-- though he hasn't seen many. The pattern almost looks like something his mother would have sewn, delicate and floral.

Dream sets George on the bed.

"Thanks," George says. "For... not making me eat."

"..." Dream pulls off his armor. "No problem, Your Highness. Besides, you looked pale. Didn't want you throwing up in front of the royal court. That would've been quite a stir." He chuckles a little, setting down his sword. "Get some sleep. Bad wasn't kidding when he said there's a long day ahead of you tomorrow."

George nods. It's not like he can really argue on that-- he's tired.

The bed is... arguably the softest bed he's ever slept in. His limbs feel almost like lead, sinking into the mattress like it's a cloud.

And as he dozes off, his mind wanders.

Even though he's slept on a hard mattress for all of his life, he can't help but notice that the softness of the bed is so, so familiar.

George slips away from consciousness, feeling steadier than he has in years.

## Chapter End Notes

... what an intro to Dream, am I right? LMAO

Thank you so, SO much for your support on the last chapter of Lucky Charm! The kudos + bookmarks + subscriptions + comments have meant everything to us and it's really helped us continue writing this AU.

Feel free to do that more this time around, but only if you want to!

Cal and I's details are in the overall notes for this story, so please do check us out.  
(mostly Cal. Go support them. You know you want to.)

## Chapter 3

### Chapter Summary

“Oh, how rude of me! I didn’t even introduce myself. Sorry, Your Majesty-- I’m Eret,” the person says, straightening out their skirt. “The royal tailor at your service. And goodness, look at you! I’ve got my work cut out for me, don’t I? Not that that’s a bad thing, of course. It’s always nice when I get to bring out the best in someone else.”

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It doesn’t feel like George has been asleep for very long before it’s suddenly morning. The windows of the king’s quarters are much bigger than any he’s seen before: they reach taller, arching towards the ceiling, dwarfing him in size. They let in much more light than he’s used to-- he feels the heat of it on his face. His own house’s windows were smaller, let in less light-- but they were familiar. This? Not so much.

His consciousness is shaken awake, jostled before he gets a chance to fully adjust. He blinks open his eyes, and he sees a face hovering over him.

George nearly screams in shock.

“Ah-ah,” says the face hovering above him. “Shh, it’s alright.”

“Who-who the hell are you,” George stammers. He turns his head towards the other side of the bed, finding the sheets tousled-- surely that means Dream must have *slept* in the bed, but when George reaches out to feel at the mattress, he finds it cold.

He doesn’t know why that’s so disheartening.

“Oh, how rude of me! I didn’t even introduce myself. Sorry, Your Majesty-- I’m Eret,” the person says, straightening out their skirt. “The royal tailor at your service. And goodness, *look* at you! I’ve got my work cut out for me, don’t I? Not that that’s a bad thing, of course. It’s always nice when I get to bring out the best in someone else.”

“O-oh?” George asks.

He feels like he’s been assaulted with a load of friendliness he hasn’t found from anyone else in the

castle thus far. Not that it's bad-- just that--

*Why am I so on edge?*

George guesses it's just the change in the atmosphere. He sits up on the mattress and brings both of his hands to his face, rubbing his eyes. The room was so bright from the giant windows he already felt a headache coming on.

George feels a tap on his shoulder and nearly jumps out of his skin.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Eret says apologetically. "You're so tense... I wonder if a massage would fix that. Hmm... that's something to think about for later. Anyway, for now, we'll probably... hm." Eret stands back a little, forming two L shapes with their hands, framing George in a rectangle.

George feels... like he wants to hide his face away from Eret's gaze. Something about the way Eret's looking at him makes him think that Eret's already mapping out all of his details, committing them to memory.

"I think... we'll probably have to fix your hair. Shave off some of that shadow, maybe? And I have to take measurements-- when Bad told me that you were here, I got so excited and sewed a few prototypes! I worked on them *all* through the night. But I'll have to see how you look in them before I do the adjustments... come to think of it, you might look good in blue, maybe green--"

"Oh, um..." George says nervously. "That-that's great, but--"

"But that's not until later. Come on, Your Majesty!" Eret says, interlocking their fingers in George's hands, pulling him up. "We've got to get you ready. You've got *such* a long day ahead of you, and I'm not letting you leave until you look your *absolute* best."

George feels like it's going to be a very, very long day.

Eret half-leads, half-drags George over to the bath-- did he *have* one of those in his room? To be fair, he didn't take a very good look around when Dream initially dragged him into the room.

"This might be awkward for you, but I'm going to have to ask you to take off your clothes," Eret says briskly. "Some of my assistants are coming by to help. Don't be too embarrassed-- there's

nothing they or I haven't seen before."

George is not reassured by it.

Eret pops the cork of a small glass bottle, pouring what smells like a scented oil into the bath. It has an almost sickly-sweet, perfumey scent-- George doesn't know what it could be-- rose, maybe? He hasn't smelled anything quite like it, and he almost feels it cloud up in the bathroom, occupying every corner.

Maybe it was the nerves that had stunned him into silence, but George hadn't realized he'd disrupted the flow of the room until Eret broke the tension.

"Your Majesty, we're on a bit of a schedule," Eret says finally.

"Oh, sorry," George said distantly. His hands hovered over the hem of his shirt before he asked, "Do you think you could maybe, turn around? This isn't something I'm used to."

"Of course, Your Highness," Eret nodded and gestured for the others to turn around as well.

Were those *petals* in the bath? How had George not--

*Whatever.* He sets aside his clothes for a later time. Taking a breath, he alerted that he was ready for them to continue their protocol.

Suddenly, the commotion resumes, and he doesn't know how it happens. It must be the heat of the bath or the sweet, overpowering scent of the room around him that so quickly fogs his mind-- but he's *in* the bath. There are more people in the bathroom now, too-- those must be Eret's assistants. Eret converses with them quietly as they preoccupy themselves with rubbing George down.

"He has good bone structure," one of the assistants says as they stack towels on a small cart. "Better than the late king's. I bet if I cut him in half, right down the vertical-- I'd get symmetrical halves. That's good, isn't it?"

"Jay, stop. You're going to freak him out," Eret says sternly, continuing to massage George's face. "Hmm... he *would* look nice with earrings. Maybe we ought to pierce his ears."

George is conscious enough to shake his head immediately.

“Oh?” Eret asks, cocking their head. “You don’t like that? That’s quite alright. Mars, can you get the razor? I think I’m almost done here.” George lets out a small sigh of relief, and his consciousness almost melts away. He’s not quite focusing on the motions, letting himself fade into the warm water and perfumed air.

He’s suddenly jolted back to complete attention with a cold metal blade touching his cheek.

He looks up, seeing Eret’s face furrowing with concentration.

“Sorry about this, Your Majesty-- I *really* feel like we have to trim this shadow. Max, what do you think?” Eret asks, looking over at another assistant who was sitting on the rim of the bathtub. Max cocks their head, studying George intently with a look similar to Eret’s.

“Yeah,” Max says resolutely. “It’s gotta go.”

Eret hums.

“Alright,” Eret says. “Then we do it.”

The tailor started by rubbing oil into George’s lower face. The smell was so strong that George felt his nostrils burn ever so slightly. He must’ve contorted his face in a funny way because it made Eret chuckle.

George tries not to jolt away as Eret begins to gently scrape away at his shadow with the cool edge of the razor, slowly and deliberately. Every time he feels like he’s about to slip away again, retreat back into his mind, the cold scrape of the razor catches him off guard, pressed against his cheek.

It slides across his skin a lot more smoothly than the blade he has at home. George realizes it was probably way too dull. Every time he shaved-- which was not that often if he was being honest-- he would get small nicks along his jawline and upper lip. This was nothing like that. It was almost relaxing.

When Eret draws the razor away, George nearly slumps with relief.

“Alright, there we go. Much better,” Eret says. “It’s a shame-- if it’d grown out evenly, I think the shadow could’ve been kept. At least, I think so. But he looks fine as he is. Mars, can you help me pull him up? I can deal with his hair while you guys dry him off.”

“Got it,” Mars-- another one of the assistants, George guesses, though he’s honestly not sure. He keeps seeing people flitting in and out of the room-- says, supporting George’s weight with one of his arms. Eret pulls George’s other arm over their shoulder, a breathless gasp leaving their lips. The two set George down on a chair in front of a tall mirror. George shivers a little, his hands reaching to hug his sides.

“Oh, sorry, Your Majesty-- I should’ve thought about that-- Mars, do we still have that robe? Maybe get him in that for now. I’m going to cut his hair,” Eret says, rolling up their sleeves.

“Gotcha,” Mars says, turning to a rack and fetching a white bathrobe, placing it in George’s hands. “I’m sure you don’t need help dressing, Your Majesty?” Mars cocks his head, a small grin forming on his face.

“Don’t tease him, I’m sure His Majesty’s had a rough night,” Eret says somewhat sternly, picking up a pair of small silver scissors.

George shrugs it off, wrapping the white robe around himself.

“No. Mars... is right,” George murmurs. “I can dress myself.”

Mars’s eyes twinkle a little.

“I like this one,” Mars chirps. “He’s funny.”

“Alright, that’s enough out of you,” Eret chides. “Get out of here and let me work.”

“Sorry, Eret,” Mars says apologetically, turning to exit the bathroom. George looks up at Eret, still standing behind him.

Eret smiles.

“Don’t be scared, Your Majesty.”

“I’m not,” George murmurs.

“But you’re tense,” Eret says. “It’s obvious. Your shoulders are all drawn up, like this--” Eret shifts their shoulders upwards, squeezing their fists a little. “Just try and lower them. I think you’ll find there’s a pretty big difference.”

George lets his shoulders fall, and-- fuck, Eret *was* right. He’d been tensed up the entire time, and he hadn’t even realized it.

He watches Eret as they work on his hair, switching between the razor blade and the clippers pretty frequently. It reminded him of his mother. Sure, his mother hadn’t been quite as neat-- Eret had obviously trained at this for years-- but it’s small comfort, nonetheless.

“There we go,” Eret says with a soft smile. “That’s better, isn’t it?” It’s not even condescending, strangely enough-- but kind, with a gentler kind of reassurance. Eret begins to cut at George’s hair, focusing more on the back of his head-- George hears the *snip* of the scissors and the faint sensation of hair dusting his shoulders and falls back into a daze, half-focusing on Eret shifting around him and the sensation of his hair being cut.

He doesn’t even notice when Eret pulls away, setting the scissors down with a *clunk* .

“There we go,” Eret crows. “Oh, I like this a lot. Come on, we’ve gotta get you dressed.” Eret pulls George up again, this time *actually* dragging him over to a larger mirror. George simply stands there, observing himself in the mirror. He almost doesn’t recognize himself for a second-- not that he got many chances to look at himself before. His hair has been cut much shorter now, to the point where he can feel a subtle breeze on the back of his neck. Without the shadow on his lower face, he looks... almost younger, his jawline sharper. His reflection blinks at him, looking almost as lost and unfamiliar as he feels.

It’s strange.

He doesn’t know whether he likes it or not.

“... the designs are here, we just have to pick one. I’m not letting him go out *naked* ,” George hears Eret say. He cranes his head to listen.

“I was thinking about this one, though it’s all just red and gold,” Eret says. “Earl, do you--”

“The king doesn’t look like the kind who can stand up to wearing ruffles,” Earl interrupts. “With



no offense to him, he's a bit scrawny? I think that ruffled design will just consume him entirely. We should do this one."

"No, but I don't really *like* the blue-dominated design," Eret protests. "I think it's just-- god, it's *too blue* . But I do like the shawl... the gold embroidery is nice. Oh, how about this darker one--"

"Add the red belt," George hears Max say. "I think it'll turn out better with that."

"Oh, you're right," Eret says triumphantly. "Yes, I think that's good. And the boots."

"Ab-so- *lutely* ," Mars crows.

George hears a bit of rustling, and Eret approaches with a bundle of clothes, hanging them over the mirror.

"Alright, Your Majesty, we're in the final stretch now," Eret says with a smile. George tries to smile back, a smile that doesn't quite reach his face.

"Thanks," George murmurs.

Eret's smile becomes a bit softer.

Compared to the rest of the morning routine, getting dressed passes by in a flash-- Eret's deft fingers are quick at helping him close up the clasps on his shirt and pants, and they even help him fasten on his boots-- though he thinks that's a bit excessive, he doesn't have the heart to interrupt Eret-- and finish it by fastening the shawl around his shoulders. George cocks his head towards the mirror.

It's strange.

He barely recognizes the figure staring back at him.

Eret's chosen outfit is much more form-fitting than he's used to wearing, a high-collared shirt made out of dark green fabric with black accents. The shawl is a dark grey, with glimmering golden embroidery along its entire length. It could've done a half-decent job of obscuring more of

the form-fitting elements if it wasn't for the fact it was tied to his belt. The red belt-- though George can't see its hues, really-- wraps around his waist snugly. The dark grey pants are a little less form-fitting, though not by much. George shifts a little on the knee-high boots, unsure what to think of it all.

He looks almost regal.

He hates it.

He supposes he'll have to get used to it.

Eret tugs at his sleeve.

"Don't mind me, Your Majesty-- I'm just doing the final adjustments. We might have to take this sleeve in a little..." Eret fishes out a spool of thread from their belt, sewing one of the sleeves more tightly to his arm. "Hm." Eret steps back a little, framing him again. They squint a little, before a triumphant grin passes over their face. "I think-- this is absolutely perfect. Oh, *absolutely* perfect. What do you all think?"

"Looks good," Jay says.

"I concur," Max and Mars both say at once.

"Mm," Earl hums. "I think we've done a good job on this one."

Eret smiles and gives a cheerful clap. "Well, there you have it. Assistant approved too!"

George tries to smile again, though he falters.

"Thank you," George says. "It-it's lovely, the lot of it, really."

Eret laughs, bowing a little.

"I know; I'm the one who made it." They wink. "Anyway, there's one last thing." Eret shifts to the

cart again, picking up--

George's heart nearly stops in his chest.

The crown. The whole reason he's *here* at all-- this stupid, *stupid* thing--

"I think you should put this on yourself," Eret says kindly, gently setting it into George's hands.

The crown feels like the heaviest and lightest thing George has ever had to hold. He turns it in his hands, observing the shimmering gold and black design. His breath comes out as a shaky exhale, and he nods.

"Thank you, Eret," George says meekly. He tries to sound more sure of himself-- more confident. He's not sure it quite works. His voice trembles.

Eret looks at him. And George can't help but think their eyes look right through him, seeing so clearly--

"Heavy is the head that bears the crown, Your Majesty," Eret says softly, patting George's shoulder. "I hope you don't falter." Eret turns to walk away, and George hears them usher their assistants out as well, and they exit the room. He hears the thud of the door behind him.

George is left alone, holding the crown.

He doesn't want to put it on.

Putting it on would mean-- would mean *accepting* everything that's happened to him thus far-- would cement him in his role. Permanently.

George sighs.

*What am I going to do?*

His palms feel sweaty. His fingers tremble a little. He wills himself to hold still, remain *calm* .

He lifts the crown up and sets it upon his head, letting out a breath he didn't even realize he was holding.

The crown feels like nothing, nothing at all. And yet, now that it's on his head, it feels like a crown of thorns, sharp and constricting. It presses into his temples, cementing itself there.

The door opens again.

“Uh, hey--”

George feels a wave of irritation pass over him. It's Dream.

“So, I was going to wait, but Eret left the room, so I thought that was as good a sign as any-- *oh*. ” The rest of his sentence seemed to die on the tip of his tongue.

George turns to face Dream.

“What?” George huffs.

“Oh, nothing. I-I just,” Dream laughs. Does he sound *nervous*? *About what*? George thinks. Dream rubs at his jaw, laughing sheepishly. “You look... nice. Your Majesty.”

George drops his shoulders, a deep sigh leaving his lips.

“Uh. Thanks,” George says awkwardly. “Um... it means a lot. I guess.”

“... you're welcome,” Dream says in response.

For an instant, time stills. Like neither side is willing to make the first move on a chessboard for fear that they will make the wrong move and end the entire game.

“Well!” Dream exclaims suddenly. “I... am going to wait outside. Come out when you’re ready. Your Majesty.” He bows, walking out of the room quickly. *Maybe too quickly*, George thinks.

He turns back to the mirror.

He feels like he’s going to be sick.

He doesn’t-- he doesn’t recognize the face in the mirror. The crown weighs too heavily on his head-- he feels *ill* wearing it, seeing the reminder of kingship on his head, becoming the *thing* that he’s hated his entire life--

George raises his trembling hands to the crown. He struggles not to just-- throw it across the room and watch it shatter into pieces.

He lifts it from his head gently.

He looks at the crown, already smudged with his fingerprints--

He throws it on the bed.

It bounces a little, falling on its side, then rolling to fall flat.

George tears his gaze away from it, turning and marching out of the room.

## Chapter End Notes

Edit: yes, for all you eagle-eyed readers, the comment about bone structure is a Heathers reference.

Had to have at least *one* cliffhanger, right?

The next update should come out pretty soon; half of it has already been penned. Gotta give thanks to Thanksgiving break that we're able to churn out these updates.

(Specific note from Kath here: I have to like, submit a shit ton of college apps and that's going to be such a pain in the ass. I'm not sure whether it's going to impact the publishing of Lucky Charm, but chances are, it will.)

## Chapter 4

### Chapter Summary

“The forge?” George asks.

“Yeah, the forge, y’know, the weaponsmiths place? One of my friends works there. We trained as knights together-- but then he realized he was better at stoking the flames than at wielding a sword. I think you’ll get along great with him. Come on.”

Dream holds out his hand.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

George marches out of the room... and right past Dream, who was standing just outside the door. He hears Dream clamber to catch up to him, fighting back an amused smirk.

“Your Majesty,” says Dream.

George ignores him.

“Your Majesty,” says Dream, more insistently now.

George continues to ignore him.

“ *Your Majesty, pleaaaaase,* ” Dream whines.

George struggles not to laugh.

Or maybe he’s just annoyed, more than anything.

“What, Dream?” George turns to face his...

He doesn't want to acknowledge Dream as his knight, honestly. Something about that-- it makes him feel like if he acknowledges it now, he's going to be permanently put into the king position, as if it wasn't already thrust upon him. It'd feel more cementing than how the crown felt on his head. If he acknowledges Dream now, it will be completely undeniable. An unavoidable truth.

He still wants to deny it.

For now.

"Let's get some fresh air," Dream offers.

"If you want to do that, go do it yourself," George says.

Dream huffs.

"*Your Majesty*," Dream repeats. "I can't go anywhere unless you're there with me."

"Now that's just a lie," George says.

"No, it isn't," Dream mutters. "Come on, Your Majesty, you haven't seen the full castle yet, have you? It might be nice to stretch your legs and take a look around."

George begrudgingly agrees with that.

"Fine, Dream. We'll go take a look. Under one condition."

George pretends not to notice Dream's eyes lighting up at George agreeing with him.

"Yea-- yes, Your Majesty?"

"Can you stop calling me Your Majesty? It's just weird," George says. "George is fine, you know. That's my name. Call me by it."

Dream's lips part a little.



“Mm... George?” Dream tries. “Do you want to go to the forge?” Dream looks uncomfortable, and then shakes his head, hands coming up to slap his face gently. “No, I’m trying it out, it just doesn’t feel right. I think I’ll just call you Your Majesty.”

“The forge?” George asks.

“Yeah, the forge, y’know, the weaponsmiths place? One of my friends works there. We trained as knights together-- but then he realized he was better at stoking the flames than at wielding a sword. I think you’ll get along great with him. Come on.”

Dream holds out his hand.

George recoils.

Dream tries not to look offended.

It doesn’t work.

George bats away Dream’s hand and starts to walk forward.

“Lead the way, Dream,” George says, gesturing vaguely in front of him. “Haven’t really explored the palace that much, so I guess this is a good change of pace.” He tries desperately to believe it. To think that this palace could be a home, be more than a gilded cage.

*I miss home.*

He misses it. Misses the feeling of worn wood against his fingers, the hard bed and threadbare curtains.

Misses knowing where he belonged.

*And it's not here.*

The lower wings of the palace have lower ceilings. George isn't sure why he notices that first. Maybe it's because it makes him feel bigger, feel less insignificant in his surroundings. Arcades lead out into the expansive fields, dotted with trees and bushes. The sun filters in from the arches, warm and bright. The stone paths look well worn, as if they've been traveled often.

"You're pretty familiar with these paths," George says awkwardly.

"Yeah," Dream says. He stops and turns back. "I've been visiting Sapnap for a long while." George can see Dream's eyes shimmering with pride, happiness— over what? George isn't sure.

He isn't sure of much of anything, especially when it comes to Dream.

Dream turns back to continue forward and George trails behind.

They hear the forge before they see it.

There's loud, raucous laughter and the sounds of metal against metal, the roar of the forge. The loud crackle of embers and sparks. George can almost feel the intense heat against his upper lip.

Dream starts to quicken his pace.

George almost struggles to keep up, now— Dream's strides cover far more ground than his—

Dream turns around.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, Your Ma— George— that still doesn't sound right." He shakes his head gently. "I shouldn't have," Dream says, a bit of guilt in his voice. George rolls his eyes.

"No, it's fine," George says. "Just go ahead. I'll catch up."

Dream smiles and turns back, continuing to walk, though George realizes he's still slowed down a bit.

The forge is about as chaotic as George expects.

There are a few blacksmiths working dutifully at forming blades or armor, their faces covered in soot or ash— George's not sure what it is.

“Oh Sapnap~!” Dream calls. George heard a loud clattering, and then he sees Sapnap— or well, the man he *assumes* is Sapnap. A raven-haired man with his hair hastily pushed back with a bandanna, his sleeves rolled up to show muscled arms and bare hands covered in calluses, clambers out from the forge, wiping at his brow. He had a bright smile painted on his face, one that only seemed to gleam more as soon as he laid eyes on his friend.

“Oh Dream~ nice to see you, bastard,” Sapnap shouts back. “Ponk, I’m going on break.”

George catches a man wearing a mask throwing a thumbs-up in the corner.

“What’s up with your names, anyways?” George says. He feels like he has to shout to be heard over the cacophony inside the forge. “Dream was already weird. Not to mention ‘Bad’ or ‘Ranboo.’” George makes air quotes. “What’s up with *Sapnap*?”

“I came up with the nickname,” Dream says, raising a hand to rub at the back of his neck. “I think we sound cooler with nicknames— imagine me just calling him Nick all the time. That’s just lame.”

George thinks it’s dumb.

Sapnap approaches closer, tackling Dream in a gigantic hug. Dream wheezes breathlessly, a laugh leaving his lips.

“Nice to *see* you, man— thought you had died because you haven’t visited for a week,” Sapnap laughs heartily. “What’s been up with you?”

“Oh,” Dream says. “About that.” He gestures to George, and Sapnap’s eyes light up.

“Oh, *you’re* new,” Sapnap says gleefully. “Wait.” He looks over George with an inquisitive stare, almost like he’s mapping George out on a blueprint. George tugs at his sleeves self-consciously. “You’re dressed in the king’s clothes. So, don’t tell me, you’re—”

“I’m king... I guess,” George says.

“What do you mean, *you guess*? ” Sapnap asks. “You’re either king or you’re not, man. But... if you are, that’s pretty cool. Shouldn’t you, like... have a fancy hat or something?” Sapnap twiddles his fingers above his head.

George feels a wave of nausea roiling in his stomach. He feels himself pale.

“I... don’t really like it,” George confesses. “It feels too fancy for me.”

Sapnap hums.

“Mm... interesting,” He says casually.

“Let’s not dwell on that,” Dream says cheerfully. “After all, George is king now, and that’s really all there is to say on the matter.”

Sapnap smirks. “Mmm, yeah, alright, Dream,” he teases. “I think you’re only saying that because you’re his knight. Am I right?”

Dream scoffs. “And what about it, Sapnap?”

“Mmm... nothing. Anyway, Your Highness,” Sapnap says, drawing out the word *Highness* with a bit of teasing lilt. George cringes a little. “Welcome to the forge. You caught us at a good time, honestly— nothing much has been going on. No wars to be fightin’ means no super strenuous tasks. Just like, the odd commission here or there.”

“Commission?” George asks.

“Yeah, commission. Sometimes a member of the palace or the court will ask for something decorative and we make it at their request. Like Ponk’s working on a fancy sword right now— it’s never gonna see use on the battlefield, but I don’t think the guy commissioning it cares.”

“Oh,” George says.

“Yeah,” Sapnap says cheerfully. “Hey, since I’m technically on break right now, why don’t I show you a sample of my work? Live and on the house.”

“Sapnap’s really good,” Dream says. “I commissioned the handle of my sword from him, actually.”

“Aw, shucks, you,” Sapnap says casually, swatting Dream’s chest dramatically. “Just because you compliment me doesn’t mean I’m gonna lower my prices for you.”

“Sapnap, come on, I’m not like that,” Dream says. “I just think you’re good at what you do.”

“Aw... thanks.” Sapnap slaps Dream’s back, keeping his hand on Dream’s back.

George isn’t sure why Sapnap isn’t moving his hand.

And then he does.

“Sapnap, that *HURTS*,” Dream shouts.

“*YOU LIKE THAT?*” Sapnap cackles, stumbling back and crashing into a cart holding coal and toppling it over somewhat. He holds onto the edge of the cart, still gasping and wheezing for breath.

“*Sapnap*,” Dream says, his voice sounding mock-scandalized. “You could’ve gotten *hurt*. You— what the hell did you do?”

“Oh, I just. Thought it’d be— ha, god, should’ve seen the *look* on your face— funny to raise the temperature a little,” Sapnap wheezes, brushing a tear from his face.

“How-how’d he manage to,” George stutters out. “Like, with no gestures, really, he just—”

“Oh,” Dream says, now starting to rub at the back of his now slightly brandished armor with an appraising hand. “That’s just... Sapnap’s thing.”

“See,” Sapnap explains. “When me and Dream were first becoming knights and all, I studied a bunch of texts about like— fire and heat spells. Got super good at them, started tweaking them around because I could— and then the instructors kinda realized I cared more about doing the spells than I did about... learning how to become a knight. So here I am.”

George swallows.

“So like, the heat thing you just did—”

“Yeah, I came up with that, pretty cool right?” Sapnap waves a hand. “I’ve come up with a few augmentations to other spells too, mostly because they’ve helped out on the forge. I promised you a demonstration, so you’ll get one. Follow me.”

Sapnap trails deeper into the forge, weaving through weapon stands and anvils to a smaller station. It looks well-used, the station coated with soot and the stones worn smooth. Sapnap picks up a piece of metal from a pile-- a long and cylindrical piece-- and begins to heat it up against a bright blue flame with a casual hand.

“A-are you not going to--”

Sapnap gives George a grin.

“Scared of a little fire, Your Highness?” Sapnap challenges.

George isn’t scared.

He's not. He totally isn't shaking, totally isn't trembling.

He hears Sapnap murmur a soft word under his breath.

*"Latom."*

Sapnap bends his fingers ever so slightly, crooking them. A shimmer runs over his hands, a bright orange-- and then he takes the heated piece of metal and begins to bend it with his bare hand.

George *nearly* screams.

"Sapnap, *what* --"

Dream sets his hand on George's shoulder. It's calmer this time, an almost reassuring pressure.

"He's fine," Dream says. "It's a basic fireproofing charm that he modified, I think. I can do the basic one, but it's a bit finicky and can't really adapt to temperatures. His can."

"Oh," George says. What else can he really say about it?

He doesn't know about those charms in particular, George supposes. He knows a basic couple-- mending ones, healing ones-- but he supposes that people in the palace have greater access to magical spells. His only exposure to magic in general was a worn leather tome that his father said was a family heirloom; it had a wide range of spells, ranging from incredibly mundane to incredibly powerful.

But to thoroughly learn every spell in the book would've taken far more time than George ever had the luxury of having.

There's a loud hiss in the air. George snaps back to attention to see Sapnap dipping the hot metal into a vat of cold water, cementing the shape. The scrap piece of metal looks rounder now, like a large ring. Sapnap hums a little, spinning it on his finger, round and round and round. George isn't even sure why he's doing it-- is he doing it just to be silly, or--

“Hey, Your Highness,” Sapnap says. “How big is your head, do you think? Like... watermelon size? Or maybe grapefruit... or pumpkin--”

“No, no. He’s more *cantaloupe* , Sapnap,” Dream chimes in.

“What does that even *mean*? ” George sputters, glancing feverishly between the two.

“Oh, *nothing* . I’m just asking,” Sapnap says innocently. “But... hm. I think I’ll eyeball it.” Sapnap turns to the hearth at his station, snapping his fingers in a quick motion. A few sparks light up from the kindling underneath, and then Sapnap draws his hand upwards, like a conductor lifting their baton. The tiny sparks erupt into a flame, pulsing and bright. He carries the piece of metal over to the hearth, letting it heat up again.

“Hey, Dream?” Sapnap asks.

“What?” Dream responds, cocking his head.

“Hand me... yeah, hand me that hammer for a second,” Sapnap says, snapping his fingers and gesturing to a hammer on one of the racks. “Gonna have to hammer out the shape a little, methinks.”

“Alright,” Dream replies casually, taking the hammer Sapnap had pointed at and tossing it into Sapnap’s outstretched hand. Sapnap picks up the ring-shaped piece of metal with his bare hand-- George still cringes a little-- and carries it over to the anvil, where he begins to strike it with the hammer, smoothing out the bumps and refining the shape. The sound of the hammer striking the metal rings in George’s ears, reverberating through the room.

“What do you think?” Sapnap asks, holding up the shape.

It’s a ring shape, with a diameter that looks to be about the size of the crown. George doesn’t admit it, but it *does* look pretty plain. But it’s perfectly round and completely smooth-- clearly done with expert hands and technique.

“It’s smoking,” Dream observes.

The piece of metal is glowing bright orange, the edges going darker with the exposure to the colder air.



“Obviously it’s not finished, you smartass,” Sapnap says, punching Dream’s shoulder with his free hand.

Sapnap dunks the ring into the vat of water. A loud hiss permeates the air as the bright orange metal slowly shifts to a duller grey.

“Anyways,” Sapnap says as he picks up a pair of tongs to lift up the shape, “that’s my demonstration, Your Highness. Obviously, from here, I’d do a lot of refining to the shape, engravings and whatever depending on whatever a client wants.” He raises a hand, a pale glow on his fingertips. The water on the ring begins to evaporate, making a small *tssss* sound in its wake. He holds the plain metal ring with sturdy hands and turns back to face George.

“Any ideas for what to put on it?” he asks, cocking his head.

George tries to think on it-- scour his brain for any suggestions, but he comes up empty.

“Um, I... I think--”

“Your Majesty!”

George’s head snaps to the loud exclamation, and he sees Ranboo clutching a sheet of paper in his hands, running towards George and Dream at breakneck speed. He stops to slump over and catch his breath, leaning against a pillar for support. Sapnap looks like he’s struggling to stifle a laugh, his shoulders trembling.

“Your-Your Majesty, uh...” Ranboo huffs out.

George looks uneasy. The effort this kid put into his work was impressive, yet concerning. He supposes Dream picks up on this, because his eyes seem to soften ever so slightly.

“Damn, kid, you don’t need to rush. Take a second to breathe--” The knight ushers out. It’s strange to see Dream so reassuring, but... not unpleasant. Ranboo takes that suggestion to heart, pausing for at least 10 seconds to fully steady his breathing before continuing.

“Ugh, *Fortuna*, ” Ranboo swears under his breath. “Alright, um. I’ve got this note from the Royal Archivist asking for your presence immediately.” He bows, holding out the letter to George.

George can’t help but feel a rising discomfort at Ranboo’s actions-- he doesn’t want to be treated with such formality. He’s not sure he’ll adjust to it as quickly as they’ll need him to-- or even at all. Well, he supposes he’d give the kingly ordering thing a go, though.

“Stand up straight,” George says. He tries to put some strength behind his words, tries to sound like he means it. Ranboo looks up at him like he’s just insinuated some horrible crime.

“Uh,” Ranboo says, standing up straighter. He looks duly uncomfortable, his brows slightly furrowed. “A-alright, Your Highness. But still, you need to--” Ranboo gestures awkwardly to the sheet of paper. George feels the heat rising in his face, and he coughs.

“Y-yea-- yes. Of course.” George takes the sheet of paper from Ranboo’s hands. Upon a precursory glance, it looks like some kind of letter, written in thin and elegant cursive. *Of course only the royal court would use cursive instead of print*, George thinks.

Ranboo moves to bow again, but then stops, as if he’s remembering George’s words.

“Y-you don’t have to, uh... read it right now, but the-the Archivist requires your... your presence in the dining hall posthaste,” Ranboo stammers out.

“Oh. A-alright.” George looks back down at the note, and then back up at Ranboo’s face. It’s hard to see Ranboo’s expression behind his mask, but George senses Ranboo’s awkwardness flowing off him in waves.

Ranboo shifts his hands, looking down at his fingers awkwardly as if he’s waiting for George to say something.

“Uh, why aren’t you--” George asks.

Ranboo gives George a helpless glance.

And then George *realizes* .

“Oh. Um. Y-you can go. Dismissed,” George says awkwardly.

Ranboo looks like he wants to bow out of instinct, but he remembers George’s previous statement. Instead, he does an awkward mixture of a wave and a salute before turning and running off back into the castle.

George hears that horrible wheeze coming from his side. He turns to see Dream’s face screwed up in laughter, an arm hugging his side to keep himself from doubling over. It’s a modest attempt, given that he immediately needs to cling to the nearby wall for support. Sapnap’s got his face covered as he laughs as well, at least making an effort to turn away from George so he can’t see his entire expression.

“What-what was *tha-aat*, ” Dream cackles out. “Holy *shit* . Your Majesty-- you’re so-- so *bad* at this--”

George feels a wave of embarrassment run over him and he stamps his foot against the ground, clenching a fist.

“It-it’s not... look, of course I’m not good at this! I just started today!” George whines. “I’d like to see *you* try to be good at- at *directing* people when it’s only your first try--”

Dream’s wheeze only worsens as George continues to protest. The harder Dream laughs, the more Sapnap seems to lose the ability to hold his composure-- slumping over his work station as he gasps for air.

“ *Stand up straight*, ” Sapnap wheezes in a mocking voice. “ *Y-you can go. Dis -- dis missed...!*” His voice trails up and dies at the last word, being cut off by another strangled laugh shoving its way out of his mouth. George stands impatiently watching them, still flushed from shame.

“Are you two finished yet?” George crosses his arms, attempting to seem indifferent. “I’ve got somewhere I need to be.”

“Ye-yeah. Yeah. I’m good. *Phew*, ” Dream wipes a tear from his eye and lets out a few dying chuckles. “Yeah, alright. I’m good now, Your Majesty. Sorry to keep you waiting.” He gestures towards the door. “After you.”

George huffs in annoyance, heading towards the door. He was walking in strides fast enough to make his cape flutter behind him elegantly. As he walks, Dream begins to trail behind him eagerly.

“I’ll be back later, Sap!” Dream waves back towards his friend, “Don’t burn yourself!”

Sapnap gasps dramatically at that. “Shut the hell up--” He laughs. “I’ll see you later! Bye Dreamie!”

Dream smiles and turns back towards George, jogging a little to catch up with the vigorous pace the king was keeping.

Just before they’re out of earshot, George hears Sapnap call, “Bye, Ge- *Your Majesty!*”

They walk like that for a while longer, the *click-clack* of George’s heels ringing out against the stone floors of the lower wings of the castle.

“Your friend’s a real piece of work,” George says finally.

Dream wheezes again at that, almost louder than before. *Where does he keep all that air?* George wonders. *What-what was even funny about that? Is he just-is he just mocking me or something?*

“Is he?” Dream asks breathlessly. “How about me, then, Your Majesty?”

George clicks his tongue, considering it for a second.

“You too,” he says finally. “You’re... a real piece of work too.”

Dream cackles again, lightly stumbling on his feet.

“Wow,” Dream says after he stops laughing. “I’ve never heard *that* from a king before.”

“What’s that supposed to mean, Dream?” George asks.

Dream takes a sharp inhale through his nose, humming a little. George can’t help but think he’s

choosing his words carefully, tastefully avoiding the sincere truth behind his statement.

“... Means you’re different, I guess,” Dream says. “Not bad,” Dream immediately adds after seeing the look on George’s face. “Just... different.”

“Oh,” George says.

It feels like a weight between them, like a circus performer on the thinnest tripwire. Like one wrong foot will send them plummeting into the abyss below.

“Anyways,” Dream says suddenly. It’s like he’s suddenly taken a pair of shears and snapped the tripwire in half, letting the performance fall apart. “Bad wants us in the dining hall, right? Let’s go. He’s a bit of a stickler for punctuality.”

George nods at that, stepping back to let Dream take the lead.

He’d been too exhausted last night to focus on the palace proper, but in daylight, the palace’s finer details stood out. The pillars appeared to be made out of marble, their fluted sides leading up to delicately carved capitals. George almost gets lost looking at the details, thinking of just how much work would have had to be put into just *one* pillar, and then for the countless pillars supporting the arched ceilings of the castle...

*And for what? For a building that hardly anyone gets to see?*

“Did the ceilings always have chandeliers?” George asks, looking up at one of them. A dainty crystal chandelier hangs from the center of an arched ceiling, breaking and bending the light.

“Yeah. They’ve... always been there,” Dream says. “They’re nice, right?”

George stares up at the chandelier a while longer.

*Why am I so fixated on it?*

“Sure,” George decides. “I guess.”

When he looks back at Dream's face, Dream seems to look at him with a strange mixture of sadness and resignation.

"What are you looking at me like that for?" George asks. "Are you that upset I'm king?"

Dream blinks, and the look disappears.

"No, George," Dream says. "I just think-- I dunno."

George continues to scan over Dream's features, cracking a small smile.

"You... called me George," He murmurs.

Dream looks like he's been caught off guard. Like George has struck him right through the heart.

"That doesn't mean anything," Dream says. "Just-just... uh, oh in *Fortuna*'s name, that--" Dream shakes his head, tousling his hair. "That doesn't mean anything. Just forget about it, Your Majesty."

"Uh-uh," George laughs mischievously, stepping closer. "You've said it once. Don't start taking it back now."

Dream looks like he wants to run away.

"I am *not*," Dream says resolutely, stepping back a good distance more. "You were the one who asked me to call you by your name, Your Majesty."

"Say it," George taunts. "Say it again, I dare you."

"No," Dream protests. "No, you can't make me."

"It's just us," George reminds.

Dream takes a breath through clenched teeth, raising a hand to pinch at the space between his brows. George almost laughs in his face, almost endeared-- *endeared?* -- by the newfound expression on Dream's face.

"*George* ," Dream grumbles, slumping his shoulders. "Can we just *please* head to the dining hall now?"

"If you insist," George says with a lofty grin.

Dream turns around quickly, heading deeper into the palace.

George lets himself feel one moment of triumph. It flows through his veins, like the sweetest nectar he could ever taste-- but he can't ride that high forever. Not when there's another trial waiting for him, a Goliath that he has to slay.

Dream is stopped in front of another set of large wooden doors. The doors are tall, made out of what appears to be dark oak with a set of ornately-made golden handles. George watches as Dream pushes them open, and they swing into the room.

"After you, Your Majesty," Dream says.

George can't help but notice Dream's voice is colder than before, like he's slipped on an unbreakable mask. He feels like the moment they'd shared together just minutes before has already slipped away from him, like a dandelion puff on the breeze.

But if Dream was pulling himself back into his role, George supposes he ought to as well.

He squares his shoulders, tries to straighten his back.

*One step forward, two steps back.*

And then he steps *forward* into the dining hall, trying to still his beating heart.

... yet another cliffhanger :^)

This chapter's the longest so far, clocking in at about 4,000 something words, I think? But it's well worth it given that Sapnap's in this chapter. God I love him so much

Thank you for your support of this fic. Make sure to comment/bookmark/subscribe/leave kudos or whatever you wanna do. I promise we're getting to the juicy bits soon! You'll get your dnf soon shhh shh

Make sure to check us out on our various social media, etc. etc.



## Chapter 5

### Chapter Summary

After a few minutes, the entire table is set with an array of people-- George is sitting between Dream and Bad, who are surrounded by the Head Chef and his servants. They all have a proportion of food, with barely any left on the serving trays.

George smiles gently and releases a content sigh. "Alright, that's more like it. Everyone go ahead and enjoy yourselves," He looks over to Bad. "So, what was that about a guest list?"

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

George doesn't really know what he's expecting when he enters the room-- he'd assumed the dining hall was going to be big, but he hadn't wrapped his mind around what that would entail. The dining hall is spacious, with giant windows reaching up to the vaulted ceilings. Some of the windows are decorated with stained glass, a few depicting members of the royal family and the kingdom scenery. The running moulds on the ceiling bend and stretch to create intricate, delicate patterns. George once again wonders why so much work was placed into a room that hardly anyone in the kingdom got to see properly.

He feels so dwarfed in this gigantic room, an almost infinitesimally small speck in the greater space overall. He almost feels vertigo watching the ceiling, observing the small details a craftsman must have slaved over. He would have almost forgotten what he was there for if there wasn't a loud cough to break him out of his stupor.

"Your Majesty." George hears Bad's voice.

George tears his eyes away from the ceiling, looking to where Bad's voice is coming from.

The Royal Archivist standing next to a large table, its span almost as long as the entire room. George doesn't think he's ever *seen* a table this large. Its surface is covered in gold inlays of vines and leaves. George secretly thinks it's impractical, given that the table has clearly seen a lot of use.

"Have a seat," Bad says, gesturing to-- George's eyes rest on an ornately carved chair. The chair appears to have been carved out of polished dark oak wood with ornate scrolls carved onto its back. It's gigantic. It looks far too impractical to sit in and far too heavy to pull back. But if Bad ordered him to take a seat, he might as well. George moves towards it, reaching a hand as if to pull it back--

“Oh, dear,” Bad rushes. “Dream, can you--”

“Yes,” Dream interrupts, pulling the chair back for George.

He rolls his eyes. It seems completely unnecessary that he has to get his chair pulled out *for* him-- it was just a chair, for Fortuna’s sake. He’s pulled plenty in his life-- this one should have been no different. He holds his tongue, though, and sits down. Bad takes a seat as well, resting his forearms on the table and folding his fingers together.

“So,” Bad says. “I don’t know how much Ranboo briefed you on, again-- or whether you *read* the letter, but we’re having a dinner party tomorrow.”

“Oh?” George asks. “And why do you have to-- talk to me about it?”

“Because I do believe it’s imperative that you’re briefed on proper dining and royal etiquette,” Bad says patiently. “You are the king, after all. For better or for worse, you represent Fortuna. All eyes will be looking at you.”

*A strange amount of pressure to be giving me, especially when I’ve only just entered the palace yesterday,* George wants to say. But he holds his tongue.

“It’s just a dinner party,” George grumbles. “It’s a party for eating food. What the hell kind of etiquette do I need for *eating* ? As long as the food makes it to my mouth, I don’t see what could possibly go wrong.”

Bad grimaces. He opens his mouth as if to blurt out something, but closes it firmly.

“Your Majesty,” Bad sighs. “It’s not just about eating or putting food in your mouth. A dinner party is like a chess game. It is a delicate balance of communication and social hierarchy. The food is almost secondary in this case. There are social aspects involved in this that... to put it nicely, I don’t think you quite... grasp? Look, what I’m saying is...” Bad pinches his brow, looking back at George with a piercing look. “You’ll be meeting your family tomorrow, and at the very least you should give them a good impression.”

George blinks.

“Who--”

“Prince Tubbo and Princess Niki,” Bad interrupts. “I told you about them yesterday.”

*How am I expected to remember everything that was told to me yesterday?* George thinks. He flicks his gaze up to Dream, the silent question ringing in his mind. But Dream looks ahead, his face unreadable-- he looks like a statue made out of the coldest granite.

George feels a sense of irritation flooding through him.

“With all due respect,” George says, “but I was *sick* last night?”

“I--” Bad sighs. “Alright. I can give you that, but later on, that’s not going to be an excuse. Many of the royal court would take that as a sign of your incompetence--”

“Well, maybe I *am*,” George snaps. “You didn’t think this through at all, did you? First, the king dies, and now I’m his replacement-- and now you all want to hoist this much responsibility onto me on my *second day* of arrival--”

Bad raises a hand.

George shuts his mouth.

“Look, Your Majesty-- with all due respect, you were our *last* resort,” Bad says.

George feels like Bad has just reached into his chest with an ice-cold hand.

“You are the only one who can take the throne in its current state. And while it is *far* from ideal, it is what we’re working with at this stage,” Bad continues. “And it will reflect poorly on me as well if the rest of the royal court sees you like-- like *this* .”

The ice spreads through George’s entire body. His fingers feel numb and stiff.

“Alright,” George forces out, swallowing a lump in his throat.

There's no point in arguing now. George is many things-- stubborn is one of them, but even he knows better than to fight a losing battle.

Bad seems to realize his harsher tone of voice, and his eyes soften a little.

"Look, I get it," Bad sympathizes. "You've been thrown into a position that nobody can relate to. It's bound to feel like a lot. I'm surprised you haven't-- reacted worse, honestly."

George doesn't know how to feel about that. He *hasn't* known how to feel about any of this-- he's barely been given any time to just, self-reflect-- he's had to deal with problem after problem after *problem* and--

He refuses to buckle now.

"Thanks, I guess," George murmurs.

Bad sits back in his chair, pressing the tips of his fingers together.

"I asked Callahan to prepare lunch," Bad says. "While we're eating, I'll go over a bit of dining etiquette and whatnot, and inform you about who's going to be at the party. It's going to be a smaller affair, given the-- sensitive nature of all of this. But a lot of influential members of the royal court are bound to appear."

"Oh," George says.

It feels like that's all he can say to this.

The door to what George assumes to be the kitchen opens up, and quickly the dining hall fills up with people carrying huge trays of food-- way too much food for the company George currently had.

"Right on time!" Bad smiles, clapping his hands.

The servants make their way over to George's seat and set down three large dishes in front of him. *This looks like how much I would eat in an entire week.* The three dishes contained a whole roasted chicken, a few rolls of bread, and a filleted fish.

George feels full just by *looking* at all the food.

"This isn't-- We *are* sharing this right?" George turns to look up at Bad.

He hears Dream snort.

Bad sighs again. "Of course not, no one is permitted to touch the King's food unless he is finished."

"*I have to eat this whole fucking thing?*" George almost screams.

"Language!" Bad shrieks. "My goodness, Your Highness, you *cannot* talk like that around guests--"

George ignores him.

"How am I even supposed to stomach one plate of this? It's such a waste of food; think of all the people this could feed, and how long it would last them!" George exclaims. He's completely dumbfounded at the idea that he-- just one, scrawny guy-- is being given enough food to feed half of Somnium. It's *ridiculous*.

"I-- I'm certain it could, Your Majesty," Bad rubs his hands nervously. He looks like he's sweating bullets, but George can't find it in himself to stop for Bad's sake. "However, this is the customary meal preparation for your status; it has been since the last king took the throne."

"What kind of selfish prick needed this much food for *just himself?*" George scoffs.

The room falls silent enough you could hear a pin drop.

The tension is thick enough that George could probably pick up one of the many knives scattered across the table and slice it open.

George assumes it's probably a touchy subject.

Bad coughs, breaking the silence in the room. “Well, I suppose we should begin talking about the guest li--”

“Take some.” George interrupts and gestures to the food.

“I-I’m sorry?” Bad asks, a look of confusion crossing over his face.

“I’m serious. I-I’m not going to eat all of this, and it would piss me off to see it go to waste so--” George looks up at the rest of the staff in the room and gestures back towards the meal they laid for him. “Help yourselves, really. King’s decree... I guess.” He leans back to look at the servants lined up against the wall. “May we get more plates-- you know what? Why don’t you guys come sit down too.”

They seem hesitant, but eventually, they follow his orders. Soon, another stack of plates is brought to the table.

Dream and Bad take their seats next to the King. They sit there, not really sure what to do. Probably because they’ve never been told to dine with the king before. *Did they just stand there all that time, like statues or something?* So, George takes initiative-- he goes ahead and starts taking some of the food from the main dishes, with the others eventually following suit.

After a few minutes, the entire table is set with an array of people-- George is sitting between Dream and Bad, who are surrounded by the Head Chef and his servants. They all have a proportion of food, with barely any left on the serving trays.

George smiles gently and releases a content sigh. “Alright, that’s more like it. Everyone go ahead and enjoy yourselves,” He looks over to Bad. “So, what was that about a guest list?”

Bad stares at George with a look of dumbfounded shock. He shakes his head, assumedly to bring his focus back to the topic at hand, taking a long and deep breath.

“Your Majesty, I--” The Archivist looks around at the spread of workers all happily digging into their meals, smiles on their faces. His gaze softens. “Why did you do that?”

“What, give them *food* ? Is that not *proper etiquette* ?” George teases, changing his tone to mock Bad’s voice. Bad almost laughs, though he seems to restrain himself a little.

“No, it’s just-- I’ve never seen someone of your status do that. Even in other kingdoms, this just... doesn’t happen.” Bad scratches the back of his neck. “It’s not that it isn’t *proper* -- it’s just... new.”

“... *Means you’re different, I guess. Not bad. Just... different.*”

George feels his breath catch in his throat.

“Oh, well, that’s good to hear.” George looks down at his food. Now that everyone’s been settled, he’s willing to admit that he’s more than a little hungry. “Well, I guess it’s time to eat, then--”

“But what *is* improper is how you’re about to start eating that chicken.” Bad gestures to George’s hand. “You’re supposed to use this fork with this kni--”

“Why is there this much cutlery, anyways?” George blurts out. “So I can, what, *eat this faster*? It’ll take me ages to finish it, anyways--”

He hears Dream choke on a mouthful of something from beside him. When George turns to look, Dream is taking gigantic gulps of water while still coughing.

George fights the smile growing on his face.

“Your Majesty,” Bad says, his voice sounding strained. “That’s just how it is. There are certain forks and knives and spoons for different dishes, and while it may seem superfluous to you, it’s actually quite important.”

“Alright, then,” George sighs. He reaches across the table to pick up a breadbasket, and Bad sputters a little, about to open his mouth to say something about *proper etiquette* or whatever, no doubt--

George takes a bite out of a piece of bread.

His eyes go wide almost as soon as his teeth sink into it.

*This is... the softest fucking piece of bread I have ever eaten, in my entire goddamn life,* George thinks. It’s soft, almost pillow-like in texture. It’s so soft it almost melts in his mouth as he eats it,

and he manages to devour the entire piece in a few bites.

“Is-is it that good, Your Majesty?” Bad asks, an amused tone creeping into his voice.

“Y-yeah,” George murmurs. He picks another slice of bread from the basket, looking at it. Even the basket is full to the brim with more bread than he could ever hope to eat in a week-- a month, maybe even a *year* if he was rationing it. It fills his stomach with a strange kind of nausea. “It’s just-- I’ve never eaten bread this soft in my entire life.”

Well, that’s a lie. His mother made bread that was pretty similar to this, maybe not *as* soft. But similar enough to make the bread remind him of home. No matter how hard he tried, he could never get the recipe right.

He almost feels like he’s going to cry. His eyes sting a little, and his throat tightens.

*This is so ridiculous*, George thinks.

Crying over *bread* out of all things.

Bad’s face softens a little more.

“Eat as much as you like, Your Majesty. It’s not going anywhere,” Bad assures. George nods, taking a bite out of another slice. “But there still is a lot of information I need to run through with you so that you’re prepared for tomorrow.”

As George begins to cut into his chicken (with the correct knife, after Bad pointed it out to him), Bad snaps his fingers. A gentle gust of wind breezes through an open window, a sheet of paper folded into the shape of a crane gently fluttering in. The paper unfolds.

“Is-is that the guest list?” George asks through a mouthful.

Bad gives George a *look* .



He swallows and repeats it again.

“Is that the guest list, Archivist?” George tries.

Bad smiles.

“Yes,” Bad says. “Well, tentatively, I suppose. We handed out these invitations at the last minute. But for sure your cousins Tubbo and Niki will be there, as will their knights, Tommy and Wilbur. Tubbo said he was pretty excited to meet you, and so was Niki. Tommy is a bit of a handful, but I’m sure he’s not going to be much of a problem. It’s hard to read Wilbur, though-- I guess he was okay with it? I made sure to give an invitation to the head of the royal guard, Techno-- but he’s not much for parties, even when they’re mandated... so I’m not sure about him. I persuaded him and he said he’d *probably* come? Asked to go early though, and I’m not one for arguing with ‘the Blade of the royal family.’ I invited Quackity, too, but he’s asked for some time off to deal with the death of the late king. It’s understandable, really-- he was the closest to him at the time of death... though I still can’t get him to tell me how he died. He mentioned something about a stabbing. I’m not sure whether that’s an exaggeration or euphemism, but I don’t think I’m going to get much else from him.” His voice trails off as he mumbles more details to himself.

George blinks.

“Oh, where was I? Right, let’s see... you met Eret earlier today, yes? They’ll also be coming to the party. I told them about it, and they got really excited about a suit they were planning on tailoring? I just... left them to it, really. I asked Ponk and Sapnap, but Ponk told me he needs to finish a commission, so he probably won’t be attending. Sapnap will, though. He seemed pretty excited about it-- said he had something he was planning on giving you? I’m not sure what that means. Who else... ah, Karl, the Foreign Ambassador. He’s coming back from the city of Sub Sole to attend; he’ll probably be leaving early too, given that he’s got negotiations to make. We’ll have to catch you up to speed with politics across Fortuna-- but that’s not till later. Ranboo will probably be there, too; the poor guy needs a break after running himself ragged for so long. And finally... well...”

Bad squints at his list.

“I’m not too sure about Phil, honestly. He’s the Royal Mage and Alchemist, but he hardly ever leaves his tower. I tried persuading him to go, and he didn’t really give me a clear answer, so I’m not sure about him. But that should be everyone coming-- it’s a bit of a smaller affair than a banquet; we didn’t want too much commotion being made about you.”

*Sure*, George thinks. It’s still more people coming to the party than he’s ever had to interact with.

“Cool,” George says. That’s about all he can say on the matter, right? He pushes away his plate, a sigh leaving his lips.

“Are you done, Your Majesty? You haven’t eaten much--”

“No, I’m good,” George says, waving a hand. Along with the bits of bread he ate, he’d taken one bite of the chicken and *knew* that he wouldn’t be able to eat much of it. Not that it wasn’t good-- it was flavorful chicken, spiced just right and whatnot, easy to chew and not rubbery or tough-- unlike the jerky he made at home. The chicken was just far too rich for him. He’s only managed to stomach two bites, and he thinks that’s more than enough for now.

The last thing he wants is to throw up his meal.

Bad nods.

“Alright, then; if you say so, Your Majesty,” Bad says. “Dream, can you escort him back to your quarters?”

“Yeah, sure,” Dream says flatly. George watches Dream push his plate away from him and push back in his chair. “Come on, Your Majesty.”

George pushes back his chair as well, following Dream out the door.

Dream seems to be leaving a distance between them, and George tries to close it a few times with no luck.

Dream is trailing up the stairs back to their room. Sometimes he turns back a little, craning his head as if to check that George is still following behind. George feels like his feet are made out of lead, pulling him down. The heels pinch at his toes and make the back of his feet ache painfully.

Dream seems to be walking faster and faster as they head back to their room.

“Dream,” George calls out. His voice is quiet at first, and it seems like Dream hasn’t even heard him, as he seems to pick up the pace. “*Dream!*”

Dream freezes.

He doesn't turn.

"Walk slower," George gets out. "Please. My feet hurt-- you're going to run me ragged."

"Sorry, Your Majesty," Dream says. He slows down to a more manageable walking pace, but George is still struggling to keep up.

George takes a breath through his nose, half out of irritation, and half out of pain.

"What the hell is up with you?" George gets out. "You've been acting off since this morning-- what happened?"

Dream's shoulders tense.

"Nothing, Your Majesty." He grits. "Don't worry about it."

"“ *Dont worry about it* ’ ?” George asks incredulously. "What the hell does that mean-- and really, please don't keep calling me that when it's just us. It makes me uncomfortable."

George pauses to search for his words. Dream stares at him, tension bubbling between his eyes.

"Did we cross some kind of boundary or something?" George settles on just asking the first question that popped into his head.

"That's just it, isn't it?" Dream says. "We shouldn't-- *I* crossed a boundary I shouldn't have." He turns to George, his face still unreadable. His expression was as unnerving as his tone, both setting George on edge. "I'm your *knight* , Your Majesty. And you're--" Dream pauses, choosing his next words carefully-- almost as if he were attempting to avoid specifics. "--and you're a king who doesn't even *want* to be king. Our relationship has to be work-related at best-- we can't risk getting *familiar* ."

"And why not?" George challenges.

Dream pauses. He opens his mouth as if to say something, but George interrupts him before he can continue.

“*Look*, Dream. I may not want to be here, but I’m not a coward,” George says. He looks down at his hands, clenching them into fists. “I’m not... going to turn my back on this. I can’t.”

He doesn’t believe himself. He’s lying to himself. Of *course* he is. He wants to run. Everything in him screams for him to run out of the palace, abandon kingship completely. And yet he remains rooted in place, like an old tree. A tree that longs for someone to cut it down, turn it into something of better use-- like a weeping willow, with its branches so low that they scrape against the forest ground. An old tree, too old to be blown to pieces by the wind.

The tree still stands.

Because if no one can cut it down, all it can do is live on unwillingly.

Perhaps that’s a particularly torturous kind of existence.

And yet something compels him to stay. Not a sense of familiarity, really-- just a strange sense of duty. Like he has to finish a game that has been forcibly started for him.

“Why?” Dream asks. “Why not just give this all up?”

*Why?*

Out of all things to be asked, the simple word phases George completely.

“I don’t know,” George says finally. “Do I have to?”

Dream looks dumbfounded.

His lips part a little, as if to say something, but he closes his mouth before anything can come out. He furrows his brows together, seemingly in confusion, before settling on his words.

“I-I suppose you... don’t.” Dream swallows. “Have to know, I mean,”

George snorts.

“Yeah, of course not,” George says. “I don’t have to know. I’m staying here until I figure it out, I guess. Not like I can do much else.”

Dream fidgets with his hands, folding and unfolding his fingers.

“But,” George says, “at the very least. We could at least... be more cordial. I’m not really sure if that’s the right way to say it-- but we don’t have to be familiar. We don’t have to cross *that* kind of boundary. But we can be... friends. Acquaintances at the very least.”

Dream frowns. But he shrugs his shoulders sheepishly, a small smile coming across his face.

“You know, Your Majesty-- you really are different.”

“You keep saying that,” George says. “I don’t understand what point you’re making here.”

“I’m not making any point, Your Majesty,” Dream protests. “I’m just saying the truth. That you’re different. And that--” Dream pauses. “Am I... allowed to be honest with you, Your Majesty?”

“You already are,” George grumbles. “You don’t need to ask my permission for *everything*.”

Dream laughs.

“I guess you’re right,” Dream murmurs. “But... in all honesty, I think you’re a breath of fresh air that this kingdom has needed for a while. And-- you may not want to be king, but I think that’s a good thing, too. I think that, like... that-- weird, awkward thing you’ve got going on makes you more approachable than the late king.”

“Well, thanks,” George murmurs sarcastically.

George looks down at his hands.

They're trembling again, for some reason.

Dream pats George's shoulder.

It feels warm.

"I mean it," Dream says. His voice has a strange tone of sincerity to it that George hasn't heard before. "George."

George feels a strange tingling in his fingertips. He clenches his fists tightly, and gives Dream a smile. He's not sure whether it reaches his eyes or not.

"Thanks," George says. "I guess."

It's not like everything is fixed from this one conversation. But just maybe, it's a fraction better. George wills himself to believe that it *can* be better. Maybe by just a fraction.

He shrugs.

Maybe it's just a naive wish.

And yet he clings to it, nonetheless.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for your support of Lucky Charm. Me, Stick, and Cal literally can't believe the amount of support we're getting. It's absolutely incredible.

We got this last chapter out for Thanksgiving break ^^b the next updates will happen when they happen. Stay tuned!

## Chapter 6

### Chapter Summary

Then suddenly he's jolted into shocking awareness by the press of a hand on the small of his back. He doesn't have to even look to know that it's Dream pressing a hand to his back, soft and reassuring. George knows he would have normally protested, but his tongue feels too heavy to speak.

His mind begins to fog up, heightening in intensity.

*"‘OLY SHIT!"*

George's gaze snaps to attention, seeing a blond-haired boy gesturing emphatically towards him.

*"THAT'S THE FUCKIN' KING!"*

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

George hears the chirping of the birds outside the window. He watches as a sparrow lands down on a branch. The sparrow begins to peck at the bark, tearing away a loose leaf before flying away.

"Your Highness," he hears out of the corner of his ear.

George focuses on the wing patterns of the sparrow. Its wings are smaller than he expects it to be. It still has some down feathers stuck to its body. It's barely grown into itself.

"Your Highness...!"

There's a sharp rapping noise on the table.

George turns his gaze to see Bad rapping his knuckles on the oak table. He looks vaguely irritated, but once George meets Bad's gaze, the irritated expression melts away. Bad smiles, though the expression seems somewhat strained.

"If you're done, we need to go over some etiquette," Bad explains.

“I thought we did that yesterday,” George retorts.

Bad shakes his head, lowering his head into his hand.

“We did,” Bad says. “But there’s additional things we need to go over as well. Like how to greet guests properly, how to talk to your cousins and the royal guard, the correct way to project your voice... I’m thinking you do some kind of speech. Some motivational words, perhaps? To allow the court to feel like the kingdom is in capable hands?”

George’s brow twitches.

“I-- I don’t know the first thing about speeches,” George says.

“Oh, not to worry. I wrote you something,” Bad says cheerfully. He snaps his fingers. A paper crane floats in idly from an open window, fluttering towards George and landing in his lap. “Unfold that. It’s a couple bullet points for a speech.”

George clumsily unfolds the paper crane. The crane twitches against his fingers, its wings beating as George unfolds the page. It flattens out on the table and the creases fade away, looking good as new despite how deliberate the folds were before. The corners of the paper still twitch somewhat, rolling up as if to try and fly away. He skimmed over the neatly scribbled notes detailing Bad’s vision: introducing himself, reassuring the crowd of his abilities, and one actual sentence.

“‘So, let the party begin’?” George reads out.

“Yes!” Bad says cheerfully. “I think it’d be good to have you deliver the speech in the beginning of the party. You know, as practice. Later on, you’ll be expected to deliver longer speeches about more than just dinner party introductions. We’ll see how you do with this one, and I’ll give you pointers for how to improve later on.”

George sighs, slumping down into his chair.

“Your Highness,” Bad chides. “Sit up straight. Chin up.”



“Who are you, my mother?” George asks snarkily. He hears Dream snort from beside him.

Bad lets out a long sigh.

“Your Highness,” Bad warns.

“*Royal Archivist*,” George says mockingly.

“Is it so much for you to take this seriously?” Bad asks, setting his hands on the table. “I know that you may not *enjoy* our customs, but it’s important for you to at least *pretend* like you care. Appearances are everything here; whether you like it or not, you are now part of the royal court. As I said yesterday, everyone will be looking at you. It’s not just the people of the castle that you have to please-- one day you will have to please foreign dignitaries, other royal courts... there’s too much at stake for you to act like a *child*.”

George rolls his eyes.

“I didn’t want *any of this*,” George says. He crosses his legs in his seat slowly and deliberately, resting his chin on his hand. He regards Bad with a look-- something he thinks either is haughty or a pointed stare of irritation.

“So you’ve said,” Bad says dryly. “But I’m afraid there’s things in this world that we can’t change. As ill-fitting as you think kingship is for you, it is the position that is thrust upon you. At least *act* like you want to fit that role. And in the meantime, go over that speech outline.”

George sighs, looking at the paper in his hand.

“Fine,” George grits out.

Bad slumps his shoulders, another strained smile coming over his face.

“Alright then,” Bad says cheerfully. “Let’s go over some additional notes, shall we?”

“*Let’s*,” George leers.

Bad’s brow twitches. Despite that, he claps his hands and a few sheets from the stacks of paper surrounding him take to the air, fluttering in front of him.

“So, it’s especially important when speaking to your cousins, Tubbo and Niki, that you manage to be humble while also enforcing your authority. They’re more experienced than you in the royal court, of course-- but you’re also king. On a hierarchical scale,” Bad says, motioning with his hands, putting one on top of the other. “You’re up here,” Bad waves one hand. “And they’re down here.” He wiggles the hand that’s slightly lower. “They’re not beneath you by much, but you still must maintain authority for the sake of decorum.”

George sighs.

“So this is all about like-- what, just faking shit?” George asks.

“*Language*, Your Highness!” Bad exclaims in a dismayed tone. “Please! You can’t let the rest of the court hear you say things like that.”

“Alright, fine,” George sighs. “I’ll try and hold my tongue.”

Bad pinches the bridge of his nose, pushing his glasses higher up his nose.

“*Fortuna*,” Bad mumbles. “I think this as much as we can talk about for now. Dream, do you mind escorting George back to his quarters?” George thinks there’s a hidden ‘*I’m too tired to deal with this right now*.’ embedded in his tone.

George looks up to see Dream nod emphatically.

“You got it, Bad,” Dream says. He rests his hand on George’s shoulder, before hooking his hand under George’s armpit and scooping him up. “When should we come down for the party?”

“Uh... when the clock strikes five,” Bad says. “You have a clock on you, right?”

Dream nods.

“Alright, then. It’s settled,” Bad confirms. “I’d recommend you not wander too far out of the palace or around it; there’s going to be a lot of people decorating and preparing and whatnot.”

“Right, let’s go,” Dream says. “Your Majesty.”

George nods, and pushes up from his chair. George focuses on the patterns the light makes as they filter through the stained glass windows in varying shades of blue and yellow. He looks at one of them. It’s a dainty depiction of a rosebush with a hand outstretched to touch one of the flower’s prickly stems.

Something beautiful with thorns.

George tears his gaze from stained glass and leaves the dining hall.

The path Dream takes back to the bedroom is starting to look familiar.

George doesn’t like the fact that each step is *starting* to look familiar.

“You know, Your Majesty,” Dream says.

George perks up.

“Yeah, Dream?” George asks.

“Would you like a bit of advice?” Dream asks, turning to face George. Dream’s eyes glimmer with barely-hidden mirth. His hands fold back and forth, back and forth, and George sighs a little.

“Sure, Dream. I mean, how valuable is your advice going to be?” George snarks, cocking his head to the side. Dream snorts.

“I think it’s going to be better advice than whatever *Bad* has given you,” Dream says. “But it’s up to you as to whether or not you want to take it.”

George pauses.

“Sure,” George says. “Why not?”

“Okay, George,” Dream says, his voice lilting a little. “Here’s my advice. You should be yourself--you’re more likeable than you think you are, you know? And I’m growing to like you a little, even after you slapped me across the face. So that says a lot about you, right? As long as you go with the flow and keep a steady head, things should go well.”

*Well.*

*That’s nice.*

“Thanks, Dream,” George says.

It’s strange.

Dream’s advice isn’t by any means complex. But those simple words somehow reassure George more than any of Bad’s fanciful language.

“No problem, George,” Dream says cheerfully, turning back around.

George snickers a little.

“You know, Dream,” George says. “You said my name twice.”

Dream literally stops in his steps.

George sees the tips of Dream's ears go red.

"That doesn't mean anything," Dream says, his voice strained. "Really."

"I think it's funny," George laughs. "That's all, Dream. If you want to call me George, go ahead. It's just us."

"Boundaries, Your Majesty," Dream reminds.

George can't argue with that.

Dream opens up the door to the bedroom.

George immediately heads for the window, looking out over the horizon. The sun sits high in the sky. Noon, maybe? He's not quite sure. But he knows he'd be at the market right now. He'd be gathering the feathers, eggs, and wheat in order to trade them. He'd be talking to Mags. He'd be talking to shopkeepers right now, asking them about their lives, if they'd gotten any good trades.

He misses it.

He misses the scent of petrichor. He misses the scent of the earth below him. He misses the scent of leaf rot and cut grass. He misses the feel of dew. He misses the feel of the rough cotton sheets against his skin. He misses the sound of passerines chirping.

He misses...

He misses knowing where he belonged.

He misses being on his own.

He misses the security of only having to care for himself.

Of knowing *how exactly* to care for himself.

He doesn't want to be here.

He doesn't want to be surrounded by people, by the *responsibility* .

He doesn't want to come off like a flimsy, fake idol.

It doesn't help that Bad keeps stressing appearances.

"I just want to be alone," George says aloud to no one in particular.

"Yeah?" Dream asks.

George startles, looking up at Dream. Dream is watching George with a saddened smirk on his face.

"Sorry," George mumbles.

"Don't be, Your Majesty," Dream says softly. "I get it, I guess."

"Do you?" George asks sharply.

"I think so," Dream says. "Maybe. I didn't-- when I became a knight, I didn't think it was a good fit for me. I missed my old life. I thought that-- that my old life was a better fit for me, you know? But... in the end, breaking out of my comfort zone helped. I like my life the way it is."

George reaches to touch the window, pressing his hand against the glass.

“But that’s just you, Dream,” George says.

“I’m just saying,” Dream responds. “Maybe we could bond over it? I guess.”

“*I guess*,” George mocks.

Dream snorts, a wheezing laugh leaving his lips.

“Alright, alright,” Dream says. “Come on now.”

George looks up at the sky.

The sun is starting to lower in the sky.

Had he been just-- standing here this entire time?

He feels a distant, ghostlike pain in his leg.

*Shit. Guess I did,* George thinks.

“You should probably put on the crown,” Dream says, gesturing to the crown placed on the vanity. The crown’s golden details glimmer in the fading light, and George feels a roiling nausea in the pit of his stomach.

“Oh,” George says slowly.

“Yeah,” Dream responds.

George picks up the crown. It feels just as it did before-- not heavy at all. Light. He places it on his head and it settles there. The weight feels bearable for now. He straightens up, squaring his shoulders. He tries to put a confident smile on his face. It wobbles for a second before his face goes more neutral out of the strain.

“Is it time already?” George asks, a note of dread creeping into his voice. It’s almost comical how quickly his stomach fills with butterflies and his heart starts rapidly pounding in his ribcage. He almost can’t find it in himself to breathe.

“Yeah,” Dream says. “Let’s go.”

The sun casts shadows across the floor.

As they draw closer to the dining hall, George’s heart thumps louder in his ears.

It’s hard to think.

It’s like someone replaced his brain with a piece of cork. It’s hollow and useless.

Dream stops in front of the dark oak doors, putting one hand on the ornate handle. He gives George a small smile.

“After you, Your Majesty,” Dream says quietly.

George’s mind flashes to the day before.

Where Dream’s voice had been cold, now it’s slightly warmer. A bit more playful, more comfortable.

Dream pulls open the doors and George is immediately assaulted by the bright light of the dainty chandeliers hung up around the room, the smell of spices, the dull sounds of people conversing, and the sound of faint harp music being played. He’s never seen this many people gathered in one room before in his life. Not even during the harvest celebrations in Somnium.

The sound of the slamming door echoes loudly.



The people milling around the room fall silent almost immediately.

The musicians set down their harps.

George feels the weight of their eyes pressing in on him.

The light of the chandeliers somehow starts to brighten.

George feels his throat start to tighten, his breaths coming out shallower.

The colors in the room almost blur together.

His heart pounds in his ears.

His head throbs.

Then suddenly he's jolted into shocking awareness by the press of a hand on the small of his back. He doesn't have to even look to know that it's Dream pressing a hand to his back, soft and reassuring. George knows he would have normally protested, but his tongue feels too heavy to speak.

His mind begins to fog up, heightening in intensity.

“ *‘OLY SHIT!* ”

George's gaze snaps to attention, seeing a blond-haired boy gesturing emphatically towards him.

“ *THAT'S THE FUCKIN' KING!* ”

“ *LANGUAGE, OH MY GOODNESS --*”

The entire dining hall erupts into laughter, and George manages to loosen up enough to relax his shoulders. He looks up at Dream with a grateful look.

“Thanks,” George murmurs.

“No problem,” Dream responds in a low whisper.

The entire party seems to revert back to talking amongst themselves, ignoring George. George feels a sense of relief-- at least their eyes were no longer fixated on him. Bad walks towards George with a sense of purpose.

“Hi, Your Highness,” Bad whispers. “People haven’t started eating yet; I told them to wait for you to give your speech. If you wouldn’t mind.”

George nods shakily.

Bad gestures towards an elevated table in the dining hall.

“Then, whenever you’re ready,” Bad says.

George nods once more and mounts the stairs.

Every step he takes makes the crown on his head feel heavier and heavier on his head.

When he finally steps onto the platform and moves towards the most ornate chair placed behind an oak table covered in a white tablecloth, he’s painfully aware of everyone’s gaze on him. As George looks down at the sea of people, he tries to gauge some of their expressions. Some of them are emotionless, others curious. He’s even seen a few looks of excitement.

It’s a small relief that nobody looks angry that he’s standing up here.

George clears his throat.

“Hello, everyone,” George starts.

*This is a horrible start.*

“I won’t keep you here too long,” George says slowly. “I’m, uh, sure you’ve been--” *Why the fuck did I say ‘uh’.* “You’ve been here waiting for me, but I appreciate you all being here to welcome me to the throne as well as your warm condolences and patience. I’m inexperienced, yes, but I promise to work hard.” *These people must literally think I’m ridiculous.* “So, anyways... with all that said, let the party begin.”

He bows a little.

*This feels absolutely ridiculous,* George thinks as he steps off the platform.

People return back to talking enthusiastically, taking food from the many tables littered around the dining hall.

“Your Highness!”

George hears a voice calling him, and he looks across the hall to see Sapnap running at him holding a circlet in his hands.

*Thank god,* George thinks. Better to have Sapnap be the first person to greet him rather than a complete stranger.

Sapnap stops short of him, holding up the circlet.

“Here,” Sapnap says softly. “I know you said that like, you didn’t like the crown. And honestly, it’s... it’s not as if it’s bad, right, but it’s maybe too formal for you. Maybe you just haven’t... grown into it yet? ‘Iunno, anyways, I hope you like this one.” Sapnap holds it out.

The circlet is a steel-like grey with a bevelled edge; in the center of the crown is an engraving of a clover with a bright sapphire gem embedded in it. It's so simple, and yet George can't help but marvel at the amount of care that has been put into it.

"It's basically the crown," Sapnap says. "But way simpler. But also way better, because I made it."

George laughs shakily.

"Thank you," George says sincerely. He moves to take off the crown, and his fingers nearly slip on its edges. He sets it down on the table behind him, taking Sapnap's crown from him. He sets the crown on his head, and he lets out a soft sigh of relief. It's lighter. It's so much lighter for some reason. "Does it suit me?"

"Yeah, I think so," Sapnap says. He scrutinizes George with an inquisitive look. "Yeah, it's good. Right, Dream?"

"Huh? Yeah," Dream gets out, sounding somewhat strained. "I like the gem. It brings out-- it brings out your eyes, I guess."

George laughs shyly, reaching a hand to scratch at the back of his neck. He feels heat bubbling up on his face, but he's not quite sure why.

Sapnap laughs brightly.

"Alright, then. I'm gonna go and eat now. See you later," Sapnap says, bowing quickly before heading back across the dining hall.

George waves a little. When Sapnap is far enough away, George raises a hand to fidget with the crown.

"Is it laying across my head right?" George asks Dream.

Dream chuckles, pushing his bangs back.

"Yeah, it is, Your Majesty. Stop fretting over it, you look good."

George hums a little, somehow unconvinced.

He sees two people walking towards him. One of them is the scruffy, blond-haired boy from earlier and the other is a brown-haired boy with a smaller crown over his head. The brown-haired boy is dressed in a formal tunic made out of a dark yellowish fabric— George thinks it may be green, but he's not quite sure. Draped across his shoulders is a dark brown cape, but George is once again not quite sure whether the cape is its true color or not. He can't see it, after all.

The blond-haired boy is dressed in a similar fashion to Dream— a leather tunic with a buckled belt and a sheath for a sword.

“Tommy, come on,” George hears the brown-haired boy say. “You have to apologize for what you said about the king.”

“Tubbo, I'm not gonna,” the blond-haired boy— Tommy— grumbles. “I was just pointing out the obvious, wasn't I?”

A taller man walks up to the pair, whacking Tommy over the head with a blunt hand.

“Tommy,” the man says in a warning tone. “Apologize to the king for pointing at him. And yelling like he wasn't there.”

“Alright, *jeez*, Wilbur,” Tommy grumbles and rubs the back of his head before fixing George with a semi-apologetic, mostly-annoyed look. “I'm truly sorry, Mr. Big Monarchy Man-- Mr. King Sir — ow!” The man apparently named Wilbur whacks Tommy over the head again. “Sorry, Your Highness.”

“No need,” George laughs awkwardly. “It's not really something worth apologizing for.”

“See, Tubbo! The king doesn't mind at all,” Tommy says immediately, turning to Tubbo with a triumphant look.

“He might not, but that was *rude*, ” Tubbo protests. “You shouldn't just point at people.”

“Well, I wasn’t *pointing* —”

As Tommy begins to shout again, Wilbur seems to catch someone on the outskirts of the crowd and waves an enthusiastic hand.

“Over here, Techno,” Wilbur calls.

A man with a long, pink braid starts walking over to Wilbur. Upon closer inspection, the man Wilbur referred to as Techno is more broad-shouldered and appears... somewhat battle-hardened. His hands are littered with scars and calluses, and while he’s dressed comfortably in a looser white shirt, it doesn’t hide the hardened muscle.

Techno fixes George with a look.

“It’s been a pleasure to meet you,” Techno says, reaching out his hand to George. George takes it, suddenly surprised at how hard Techno is gripping it, and Techno begins to shake his hand with some urgency. “Really, it has.”

“Uh,” George starts.

“Glad to see you agree. But I have some *urgent* business to attend to, so if you don’t mind me, I’ll be leaving.” Techno lets go of George’s hand and turns to leave, his hair swishing behind him.

“Bye, Techno,” Wilbur calls after him.

“Say hello to Phil for us!” Tubbo adds.

Techno’s only sign of acknowledgment is a casual wave of his hand.

As soon as it appears like Techno is out of earshot, Tubbo grins apologetically.

“He’s always like that,” Tubbo says cheerfully. “I’m surprised Mr. Bad even managed to get him to stick around until you showed up. I think he likes you. But it’s a shame Phil didn’t show up. He’s probably still in his tower or something... I didn’t see him in the crowd-- but that’s okay. I think he’s not really much for parties. Even when the last king was doin’ em, he never showed up.”

“Oh?” George says nervously.

“Aside from all that!” Tubbo says, his voice now turning more excited. “You must be George! My cousin! And Niki’s cousin!”

“Huh? Oh, yeah,” George says sheepishly.

“You look kinda familiar! Family resemblance, I guess?” Tubbo questions, peering at George’s face. “Oh, Wilbur! You should go get Niki. She should be really excited to see George too! We’ve been looking forward to getting to see you, because, see, after the old king like— fell off a roof or something, we’ve been wondering who Bad got as the replacement. We almost didn’t believe it when Bad said we had a cousin! I mean, *I* think family is always a win, but at the time I was like ‘surely not!’, y’know?”

“Uh,” George says.

He’s not quite sure how to respond to Tubbo. He seems friendly enough, at least. Friendly and overly talkative.

“Anyway! Besides all that, have you met my best friend A.K.A. knight Tommy? He just apologized to you n’ all, but it would be nice to be more acquainted, right?” Tubbo says, dragging Tommy by the arm. Tommy groans a little, giving Tubbo a withering glare.

“Hi, Your Highness,” Tommy grits out. “My name is Tommy and my ‘liege’ or whatever is Prince Tubbo. He’s a horribly annoying piece of sh—”

“Oh, hello again, Your Majesty!”

Tommy is interrupted by Eret. The Royal Tailor is dressed in an immaculate suit, complete with fine golden embroidery along its hems.

“Oh, you look *absolutely* handsome in low lighting. I knew I did that color scheme right,” Eret says as they walk over, smoothing down George’s shoulders. “Gosh, I can’t wait to design you something new— oh. Wait. I’m getting ahead of myself. That was a lovely speech you did, truly. I’m glad Fortuna is in such capable hands.”

Eret curtsies, sweeping their foot behind them as they lower themselves down before straightening back up again.

“I’ll be seeing you soon,” Eret says with a brilliant smile before heading back into the party.

George blinks.

“Eret’s nice!” Tubbo says. “They did my outfit for today! And Niki’s. Where is Wilbur at, by the way? Shouldn’t he be back?”

“We’re over here,” a voice calls.

George turns his head to see Wilbur escorting a woman dressed in a white and gold gown across the room. Her sleeves are long and billowy, decorated with clover accents; it’s almost similar to his cape in some ways.

“Wil, you needn’t stick by my side so closely,” the woman chides. “We’re just walking across the room. What kind of attacker could be here?”

Wilbur shrugs.

“Dunno, but it’s protocol, Your Grace,” Wilbur mutters.

“Niki!” Tubbo calls, waving his hand at her.

The woman— Niki— brightens considerably after spotting Tubbo. She gathers up her dress in both her hands, dashing over quickly. She stops in front of George, tucking her long hair behind an ear.



“You must be George!” Niki says excitedly, reaching out to grab both of George’s hands with her own. “It’s such a pleasure to meet you!”

“Uhhh,” George gets out. “Hi.”

“Oh, you don’t need to be so nervous around us. After all, we’re family, aren’t we?” Niki exclaims cheerfully. “When Bad said you lived all the way on the outskirts of Fortuna, I was so surprised! I’ve never been out there before, but I’ve *always* wanted to travel-- but the palace is still really nice of course, don’t get me wrong,” Niki adds hastily. “What was your town called? Was it nice? You have to tell me all about it right now.”

“Uh,” George starts. “It’s called... Somnium. I live-- well, lived, I guess, a bit farther along the outskirts of it. In-- in a small house.”

“Oh!” Niki says. Her eyes sparkle excitedly as she squeezes George’s hands. “What was the *house* like? I’ve never gotten the chance to live by myself before; I was born in the palace and Wilbur was assigned as my knight after I turned twelve, so I’ve never gotten the chance to truly experience that kind of independence. That must be really cool.”

“I-I guess, yeah,” George says. “It was... it was nice.”

“Do you miss it, still? You haven’t been in the palace very long,” Niki says.

“Yeah. All the time,” George responds immediately. “I-is that bad? I-I keep thinking about the-the things I’d be doing if I was back home right about now...”

Niki’s smile softens.

“Don’t worry, George. All kings have to start from somewhere. And if I’m being honest, you are a *breath* of fresh air from the old king. I mean, after he drank himself to death, I was excited for new blood. Even if it can’t be me,” Niki explains.

“Wait, he *drank* himself to death?” Tubbo gawks. “I-I thought he’d fell off the tallest tower or something. Thought someone pushed him.”

“No?” Niki says, dropping George’s hands and turning to Tubbo. “He drank himself to death,

surely! That's what Phil told me."

"Well, *I* was told that Quackity stabbed him," Tommy brings up.

"You always think stuff ends with stabbings!" Tubbo whines.

"Well, *I* heard he had a perforated liver," Wilbur says.

"What the hell is a *perforated liver* --" Tommy sputters.

George feels his head start to buzz unpleasantly as the conversation heightens in intensity.

Dream rests his hand on George's shoulder, leaning down to whisper into his ear.

"Do you wanna get out of here? I have a feeling they won't be done for awhile," Dream says in a conspiratorial whisper. His breath tickles George's ear.

"Uh," George says awkwardly. "Sure, I guess. That'd be--"

George spares the conversation a glance.

Tommy is grabbing Wilbur by the front of his shirt, yelling about something related to... women. Something or other. George isn't very sure what he's hearing, but Wilbur has a look of exhaustion on his face and Niki and Tubbo are stifling giggles.

"That'd be nice," George finishes.

Dream nods, lowering his hand to the small of George's back again and leading him away from the group.

They head further into the party.

As they head into the crowd, the crowd splits to make room for them.

George isn't sure whether he's uncomfortable or relieved.

Maybe a strange mixture of both.

"So," George starts. "I've got a few questions."

"Yeah?" Dream asks.

"So like, how did the previous king actually die?" George asks. "Like, everyone keeps talking about it and debating it and like-- it just looks like nobody has any actual idea how he-- how he actually died. You know?"

Dream hums a little, wetting his lips casually.

"I guess that's the thing," Dream says. "The old king didn't really have a knight. Tommy mentioned Quackity-- Quackity was the old king's closest assistant, but even he wasn't in the room when the old king died. The guards who found him-- they really didn't give a good description of *how* he'd died, and somehow they decided to consult Phil about it. Phil's been... close-lipped about it. So the best we can do is just-- guess, you know? But as you can clearly see... word gets around. And it's not necessarily the most accurate."

"I see," George says.

He doesn't really get it.

"So, like-- does anyone in Fortuna at large know?" George asks.

"What? No, of course not. The king didn't really... well, he didn't make public appearances. As far as everyone in Fortuna is concerned, the king never died. Bad's probably gonna bullshit it, say you were the king all along and not to worry, blah-blah-blah," Dream waves a hand casually. "I'm not sure if you'll ever have to make that kind of public appearance though, so it's probably best not to worry your pretty little head about it."

George sighs in irritation, giving Dream a pointed glare.

“I’m not *worrying* my head about anyth--”

And then he crashes into someone else.

“Oh jeez,” a voice sputters out. “Oh, *Fortuna* , I crashed into the king! I am so sorry about that.”

“At ease, Karl, it’s fine,” Dream says with a hint of amusement in his voice.

“Are you sure? I didn’t give him, like, a concussion or anything?” the voice-- Karl, George supposes-- asks nervously. “I was in such a hurry! I gotta like, get back to Sub Sole as soon as possible because we’re negotiating like, a marine policy--”

“No, I’m fine,” George squeaks out. “Really, I’m good.”

“Oh, thank Fortuna,” Karl says in a relieved voice. “I don’t think anyone would’ve let me live down giving the king a concussion. Anyways, Your Majesty— pleasure to meet you! I’m Karl. Foreign Ambassador, I’m sure Bad has given you the details about that. There’s plenty of details and information and things that I think we’ll have to go over together, especially about Sub Sole... mm, Leporem may or may not be an issue down the road. But we can go over all of that when I’m back from the meeting.”

“Oh?” George asks. “Right, wait. You’re in the midst of... negotiations.”

“Yes!” Karl says excitedly. “That’s what I’m doing. So, now that I’ve met you, I really have to get going. You should try one of these rolls. The butter ones. They’re really good, here.” Karl shoves one into George’s hands, squeezing his hand as an afterthought before running out the door.

George looks down at the butter roll.

It’s in the shape of a rose.

His stomach growls unpleasantly, hunger churning in his gut.

*Something beautiful with thorns.*

He almost wants to throw it against the wall.

“Your Majesty,” Dream says. “Do you have like, a vendetta against butter rolls or something?”

“Huh?” George asks sharply. A ghost of a flinch crosses Dream’s face.

“Just that you crushed that thing,” Dream says, gesturing to George’s hand. George looks down, realizing that the butter roll has been crushed to mere flakes in his hand. George’s face flushes, quickly brushing the crumbs off his hands.

“That-that doesn’t mean anything. Just a lapse in judgement on my part,” George stutters out.

Dream chuckles.

“Yeah, sure, Your Majesty.”

The party continues like that, with George making small talk between other dignitaries and members of the royal court. Faces that leave his mind as quick as sand from between fingertips, small talk that feels as slow and as meaningless as molasses. Discussing the weather, someone’s haircut, velvet versus satin fabric... did the people in court really not care about anything other than themselves? George’s mind spins unpleasantly, a heady fog making it hard to think.

He doesn’t know how long it takes for people to start filtering out of the dining hall, but by the end his feet are aching, and his face almost feels sore from smiling too much, and his stomach grumbles uncomfortably from too many *goddamn* hors d’oeuvres.

*I just want to go back home*, George thinks tiredly. At least when he was by himself at home, nobody expected him to have an in-depth discussion about the difference between mahogany and maroon. He *still* didn’t know what the difference was, but, once again, it wasn’t like he could see it accurately.

“George!”

George raises his head to see Niki waving him towards her.

“Y-yeah?” George asks as he walks across the dining hall, trying his best not to look like he was in pain.

“It’s time for me and Wil to retire,” Niki says. “But I just wanted to tell you that this party has been lovely and it was so nice to meet you for the first time! If anything, I believe in your kingship abilities. Wil enjoyed his time, too. Right?” Niki looks at Wilbur with an expectant look.

Wilbur rubs at the back of his neck, a sheepish smile crossing his face.

“Yeah, sure,” Wilbur mumbles.

“There we go!” Niki says, clasping her hands together. “Alright. Well, we’ll see you around sometime, Your Majesty! If you need me, send a message through Ranboo. I’m sure he’ll know where to find me.” Niki finishes her statement with a curtsy before ushering Wilbur forward and heading for the dining hall’s exit.

Tubbo approaches shyly, pressing the tips of his fingers together.

“I don’t wanna keep you too long,” Tubbo starts. “But this was really fun, like Niki said.” He stifles a yawn behind his hand, an embarrassed giggle leaving his lips. “Gosh, I’m tired. Tommy and I will be heading out, too. We’re usually out in the grounds with the horses during the day, so if you wanna come find us, that’s probably it. Tommy, you should say goodbye, too--”

“No,” Tommy interjects. “I’m tired as shit. I’m heading back.”

“Ugh, fine, wait for me,” Tubbo whines. He gives George an apologetic glance before waving. “Alright, then. I’ll see you around, too, Your Majesty!” He turns to rush after Tommy, who, to his credit, is waiting for Tubbo by the door.

The door slams.

George and Dream are standing alone in the dining hall. Well, not completely alone-- there are a few servants running around, beginning the process of cleaning up.

“Think we should head back?” Dream asks.

George nods, reaching a hand to rub at his eye.

“Mm, yeah... sure,” George mumbles. “I think I’ll pass out if I have to entertain another court member for a second longer.”

“Ah, well, don’t pass out on me,” Dream teases lightly. “Not before we get to bed, at least.”

George rolls his eyes, taking a step towards the door. He winces a little as a stab of pain goes up his leg, and he tries not to make his sigh sound pained. *I can’t believe I have to walk back in these.* The castle is by no means small, and George is dreading the familiar trek back to his room more and more.

It feels like his feet have been wrapped in the sharpest thorns as they begin walking back. George vaguely remembers a time he cut open his foot with a sharp thorn from a briar bush. It’d hurt like hell to walk on. The pain from back then is comparable to how he feels now-- or at least he thinks so.

*Has the palace always been this big?* George thinks with some irritation as they walk. He’d never noticed it before when his feet weren’t hurting, and yet now that he was so cognizant of the horrible pain in his entire foot, it seems like the ornate hallways with equally ornate windows looking out into the fields of the palace grounds just... never *end* . Like a never ending, distorted nightmare building.

George observes the ornate spiral staircase leading to the second floor of the castle and steels his nerves for more pain. But as he takes the first step up one of the stairs, the pain is almost enough to make his leg give out.

“Dream,” George gets out through a breathless gasp of pain. “Come back down here. I need to-- I need to get these fucking heels off. They’re such a fucking pain in my goddamn ass, holy *shit* . Please, help--”

Dream starts to wheeze in laughter.

“Alri-iight, Your Majesty,” Dream chuckles. “Here, use my shoulder.” George places his hand on Dream’s shoulder, unzipping the zippers on his high heels, wincing as his feet finally come free from the hellish restraints. Dream is laughing the entire time, his trembling shoulders making him an unreliable support at best.

“Fucking *finally* ,” George moans in relief as he takes off the other heel. The floor is far colder than he expects it to be, but he can’t find it in himself to care. It’s almost a relief against his hot, pained feet.

“Wow, so those heels were basically providing like-- all of your height, huh?” Dream says as they begin to walk up the stairs again.

“Oh fuck you,” George barks back instantly.

Dream laughs again, wiping a stray tear from his eye.

“Sorry, sorry,” Dream gasps breathlessly. “I just thought-- ha, that’s so funny. You’re so *short* .”

“I’m not *short* --”

“ *Fun sized* ,” Dream continues, a high-pitched wheeze leaving his lips.

“ *Dream--!* ” George shouts.

“Okay, okay, sorry,” Dream says, a slightly guilty note entering his voice. *At least he has the sense to be slightly apologetic about it*, George thinks begrudgingly.

They march up the stairs in silence.

But now that George’s mind is no longer dominated by the pain in his feet, he feels up to asking more questions.

“So,” George starts.

“So,” Dream echoes.

“Stop-- look, I just want to ask you a question,” George says.



“You’ve asked me a bunch of those today,” Dream says pointedly.

“Yeah, so? It doesn’t-- it doesn’t mean anything,” George says with a shake of his head. “Look. Alright, so... Niki said that Wilbur was assigned to her when she was young-- and he’s her knight, right? I’m assuming Tommy was assigned to Tubbo in the same way...”

“I don’t know what you’re getting at,” Dream teases.

“I-- shit, I’m *getting* to that--” George sputters. He hears Dream giggle a little, and he shoots Dream a withering glare. “Look. I just wanted to know whether you were assigned to me or not.”

Dream hums contemplatively.

“You weren’t assigned to me,” Dream answers. “I volunteered.”

George feels his heart rocket to his stomach and then violently bounce back into his ribcage.

“ *Wh*. What? No you didn’t-- *why would you do that??*”

“I did!” Dream says defensively. “Bad visited the guards’ quarters and was like ‘Hey guys! We’re getting a new king, who wants to be his knight’ and I said I’d do it. And before you ask me why I made that choice, I... don’t really know? It... it... just felt right, I guess.” The last part comes out in a bit of a sheepish mumble.

George blinks hard.

“Oh,” George says stupidly. What else can he say to that?

“ *Oh* indeed, George,” Dream says. “I thought it’d be kind of easy, honestly? Like, I didn’t think it’d be as much work as it is. You’re high maintenance, Your Majesty. Surprisingly.”

“What does *that* mean?” George growls indignantly.

Dream taps his chin in mock consideration, a hum leaving his lips.

“Whatever you want it to, Your Majesty,” Dream says with a mischievous grin. “We’re back.” George tips his head upwards to see the pair of blue doors that lead into the bedroom.

“I guess we are,” George says.

Dream pushes open the doors, and somehow George feels a fervent sense of relief that the day is over. *Finally*.

They change in silence.

George hangs his cape up on the mirror along with his shirt and pants, buttoning up his old shirt and pants-- he’d resolved to wearing them as pajamas now, mostly because he refused to wear the silk underclothes that Eret had included with his king’s outfit. They’re a small comfort. -- and walking over to the bed, tucking himself under the silken sheets.

The bed’s weight gives a little as Dream lies down.

“Goodnight, Your Majesty,” Dream says, his voice beginning to grow thick with sleep.

“Night,” George mumbles.

He feels sleep wrapping its arms around him, pulling him down into its warm embrace.

And mercifully, his mind goes dark.

## Chapter End Notes

holy shit, thank you for 10k hits!

it's been such a trip getting so much support and we hope you stick around for more

chapters :) I promise we're gonna get into the dreamnotfound soon

## Chapter 7

### Chapter Summary

A hand touches his shoulder.

George screams, whirling his head around.

A man stands before him, the hand that had reached out to touch him pulling back. In the pale moonlight, the man's long, blond hair almost shines silver. His eyes appear almost golden, narrowed ever so slightly as they focus on George's expression. The man is dressed in a dark yellow robe that almost appears to shift colors as George observes it.

"Who-who the fuck are you?" George demands.

The man appears to take a deep sigh.

"I'm Phil," the man says. "The Royal Mage."

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The darkness presses around George like a vice. Shock-like pain blooms from his sternum, spreading lower. It feels like there are thorns piercing his lungs, sending shooting tremors down his sides. He tries to crane his head to look around, but his head is stuck firmly facing forward. He casts his eyes down to see--

A sudden, horrible wave of nausea rolls over him.

The crown is in front of him, placed upon an ornate golden pedestal.

A beam of light shines down, illuminating the crown in its cold, horrible glory.

Shining, horrible blades of light pierce his vision, but he doesn't even squint.

It's like he can't even move or react.

He begins to move forward.

Shooting pain erupts in his feet. It hurts to move, and yet--

He can't stop.

Not for lack of trying.

He tries to dig his heels into the ground, halt his movement entirely. But his body doesn't listen. It's like he's being puppeted by an invisible hand, moving to the beat set down by an invisible conductor. He stops in front of the pedestal, reaching his hands to grasp the crown firmly in his fingers.

*Stop.*

He can't.

His arms raise.

*Someone, please.*

*Stop me.*

*Help me.*

*Someone--*

George wants to cry.

But his body won't even let him.

His face is expressionless, his body moving smoothly and deliberately as the crown is placed on his head in one motion.

And then the *pain* nearly causes George to collapse.

The horrible, *overwhelming* constricting pain against his forehead and temples. Like briar thorns digging into his face, piercing his skin.

He can control his hands again, somehow-- and George raises his hands to pull the crown away from his head, stop it from digging into his flesh, but--

It doesn't budge. The crown has suddenly become a circlet of thorns, firmly pressed into his head and constricting. Even as George begins to tug at it in a feeble attempt to pull it away from his face, the circlet grows ever tighter. The thorns prick at his fingers and his palms, and when he pulls his hands away from the circlet, he--

His hand comes away red.

He raises his hands to hair, trying one last time to pull the crown from his head. To his horror, his hair feels damp.

When he looks at his hands again, he finds them coated with blood. It drips from his fingers onto the ground, drop by drop by *drop*.

George falls to his knees and screams.

His eyes shoot open and he sits up in a panic. His heart throbs in his chest, pounds in his ears.

There's a horrible, stabbing pain in his temples.

He raises one hand to appraise it, expecting to draw blood, but he finds nothing.

*It was a dream.*

*A nightmare.*

George draws his legs tighter to himself, burying his face in his arms as he tries not to sob. His breaths come out uneven, shaky. He sneaks a glance at Dream, only to find the knight deeply asleep, his chest rhythmically rising and falling.

George's hand reaches out across the expanse of the bed, jerking to a stop before he can touch Dream's shoulder.

*Why do I find myself reaching for him?* George wonders bitterly. Maybe he just wants someone to comfort him, to hold him close and tell him he was going to be okay. Like a child being reassured there were no monsters under their bed, wrapped in a warm and reassuring embrace. But he can't bring himself to ask for help. He won't reduce himself to something so *weak*.

He looks out the window.

The moon still hangs high in the sky, stars dotting the inky expanse of the night.

George entertains the idea of going back to sleep.

But the adrenaline pumping through his veins and causing his heart to pound uncontrollably and his breaths to come out fast and shaky won't let him.

He has a choice.

But luckily for him, he's always been a fan of making bad choices.

As quietly as he can, he throws the sheet off his legs and swings himself off the bed. He hisses softly at the sensation of the cold floor against his feet, but he wills himself to move forward. His hand grasps the handle of the bedroom door, pushing it open with his shoulder.

He steps out into the silent palace, shutting the door behind him with a quiet *thump* .

The silence is deafening, for a cheeky turn of phrase.

For a furtive, absurd second, George thinks he's *breathing* too loudly.

*Maybe I'll just explore the castle until I get tired or something*, George thinks. It already sounds like a bad idea to him-- he hasn't explored much of the castle, after all, so the chances of getting lost are high. But even despite that, he presses forward.

He decides to turn to the right instead of to the left like he would have if he was trying to head down to the dining hall or out of the palace through the main doors. It's somewhat strange to George that the room he's been sleeping in is in the dead center of a hallway with other branching paths-- but he's grateful for it now, because that means he can explore and hopefully walk off his adrenaline burst.

The moonlight casts a pale, silvery glow on the walls of the castle. The paintings decorating the halls seem to follow him with their eyes, but when George actually observes the paintings, their eyes are soulless and empty. He's always had a slight distaste for royal portraits anyway; he finds them unnerving.

The hallways start to blend together.

Paintings and windows and running moulds with dainty carvings of vines and leaves seem unending. Like a maze full of dead ends and no exit.

George chokes down the panic rising in his chest.

*Fuck, this isn't how I wanted it to go-- all I wanted was to just--*

A hand touches his shoulder.

George screams, whirling his head around.



A man stands before him, the hand that had reached out to touch him pulling back. In the pale moonlight, the man's long, blond hair almost shines silver. His eyes appear almost golden, narrowed ever so slightly as they focus on George's expression. The man is dressed in a dark yellow robe that almost appears to shift colors as George observes it.

"Who-who the fuck are you?" George demands.

The man appears to take a deep sigh.

"I'm Phil," the man says. "The Royal Mage."

George feels the name stick somewhere deep in his mind.

"Oh," George says, though no less louder than before. "Weren't you supposed to be at the party?"

"I was," Phil says, tucking his hand back into his robe. "But I'm not much for parties. There's too much information. Too many people. I decided it wasn't worth it, ya'know?"

George supposes he can empathize with that statement.

Phil's eyes are fixated on something far away, beyond George's sight.

"D'ya maybe wanna sit in for some tea, Your Majesty?" Phil asks quietly.

"Tea?" George questions.

"I believe that's what I said, yes," Phil says, giving George a bit of a smile. It's a strange smile that doesn't even make it to half of his face, much less his eyes. "D'ya want some?"

"Uh... sure," George says. "But where would we-- have it? Not... in a hallway, right?"

Phil chuckles.

“No, that’d be quite right-- not in a hallway, Your Majesty,” Phil says kindly. “We’d be having it in the observatory. That big ol’ spiral-y lookin’ tower; my residence.”

“Oh,” George mumbles. “I see.”

There’s a pause where neither of them say anything. George stares down at the ground, trying to focus on the details on the floor. In his periphery, he sees Phil focusing on something again-- maybe the wall? Though their adjacent wall didn’t really... have anything worth looking at. Just some decorative sconces.

“I think we’ve done enough standing around,” Phil says. “If you’re serious about that cup of tea, you can follow me-- otherwise I could point you back in the direction of your room. You’re lost, aren’t you?”

George blinks.

“How did you--”

Phil taps his head.

“I wouldn’t be the Royal Mage if I couldn’t at least dabble in divination, right?” Phil asks. It’s a rhetorical question, but the phrase ‘divination’ goes right over George’s head. “But even without it, you looked lost enough for me t’ guess it.”

George blinks again, coughing into his fist.

“Alright, I get it-- I wouldn’t mind that cup of tea,” George says.

Phil smiles again.

It seems almost like a grimace.

The castle's observatory is farther away than George expects. They head far deeper into the castle's hallways, past halls of stone statues and decorative armor. George cranes his head to look at the statues' details, but finds himself rushing to catch up with Phil as the mage keeps up a relentless pace.

They stop in front of a set of dark oak doors.

George's brow furrows ever so slightly. *What's up with every single door in this castle being dark oak? Don't they know that other kinds of wood exist?*

"The night's a bit chilly," Phil says as he grasps the door. "It's a short walk outside. Do you mind?"

George shakes his head.

Phil nods in acknowledgement, pushing open the door.

The cold night wind feels harsh, even despite Phil's warning. George braces himself against it, lets the wind stab needles into his skin and shivers from the icy feeling suddenly blooming against his face and hands.

George instinctively gasps from the sudden shift, forcing an amused chuckle from Phil. He grins at George, then glances back out towards the direction they'd be walking in.

"Told ya' it's a cold one," Phil chuckles. "'S dark too, here let me do a quick-" He snaps his fingers. Sparks burst from his fingertips, their soft crackling building to a loud *pop*, resulting in a small yet sturdy flame flickering in the palm of Phil's hand.

"There we go, nice 'n bright now, eh?" Phil begins to walk into the darkness. "Let's get on, then."

George gawks at him, frozen in place.

“Wh-what did you just do? How did you do that?” George shakes himself out of his stupor and hurries to catch up with Phil and his little wisp of light. “That was like what Sapnap can do... I know you said you’re the Royal Mage but-- but *shit*, that was cool.”

Phil laughs heartily.

“Well, yeah.” He cocks an eyebrow at George. “Of course I know how to do simple pyrotechnics-- whaddya think I am, some kind of *amateur*?”

“Wh- *no!* No, Fortuna, not at all! I know you aren’t an amateur,” George panics. “I just saw Sapnap do that back at the forge and he gloated about how unique to *him* it was and--” George is cut off by another chortle from the man walking beside him.

“I’m just fuckin’ with you, Your Majesty.” Phil feigns wiping a tear from his eye. “No worries at all, I know you probably aren’t accustomed to seeing it around all the time.”

“I’m really not,” George murmurs softly.

Phil gives George a look, though it isn’t unkind.

“I s’pose it must be different,” Phil says as they draw closer to the observatory. “The palace, I mean.”

“Yeah,” George says. “It-it’s been a lot. I’ve just been-- I’ve been... nevermind. Sorry--”

“No, do tell,” Phil says. Phil waves his hand, dissipating the flame, before he claps his hands. At once, several lanterns around them light up, their feeble flames spitting sparks in the cold night air. The view of the observatory rises high into the sky, a tall and somewhat rickety tower in comparison to the sturdy structures of the rest of the castle. A long telescope juts out from the roof, barely visible against the dim trickle of stars. “Feelin’s fester, y’know. When they’re not being put out into the open.”

George swallows.

“I just wondered if kingship gets any easier. Or like-- if... if the palace stops... feeling like some kind of gilded cage. Or a fancy-- fancy prison sentence,” George gets out.

George isn't sure how long they walk, but they stop in front of a set of dark doors. Like every other door in the palace, it looks to be intricately carved with delicate patterns-- but these ones are different. They almost resemble a star chart-- George has only ever seen those in a small magic shop full of trinkets that he couldn't afford-- but to see it up close and in person is different.

"Do you want the honest answer or the answer that makes you feel better, Your Majesty?" Phil asks quietly as he opens up the door into the observatory.

George pauses at that.

"I-I dunno," George says. "Uh- as Royal Mage, what do you think I should hear?"

Phil chuckles.

"I don't work like that, Your Majesty," Phil says. "I got answers for everythin', basically, but you gotta ask the right questions."

"Oh," George says, somewhat stunned. "S-sorry, I--"

"Nothin' to apologize for," Phil interrupts. "I s'pose i can give you an answer." Phil pauses, as if looking for the right words to say. For a moment, all George can hear is the whistling of the wind and the soft crackling of the lanterns around them. "It might get easier. It might not. Depends on what you make of it."

George sighs. He doesn't know what kind of answer he was expecting, but Phil's words... they're not particularly comforting. But they're not particularly hurtful either. Perhaps they amount to a net zero, meaning absolutely nothing at all. They're just words.

"I guess," George says.

"I admit I was kinda trickin' you, Your Majesty," Phil says with a smile as he beckons George into the observatory.

"What?" George asks, suddenly stunned.

“I would’ve answered the same regardless of which you picked,” Phil explains. “I just wanted to see what I could coax out of you.” He pauses. “Sorry about that, y’know, tricking you.”

George blinks.

“I-I...” he swallows. “That’s... fine. I guess, I just--” He pauses. The words feel like they can’t come out. He’s not sure what to say at all. “It’s fine.”

Phil gives George a half-smile.

“Alright,” Phil says. “Come upstairs, I think we’ve wasted enough time.”

George nods with some apprehension, following Phil up the rickety stairs of the observatory.

The observatory is... strange.

The ceilings have been enchanted to reflect the night sky-- the moon hangs in the center of the ceiling, casting its pale, silvery glow down on the rest of the room. The bottom floor consists of a small foyer with a large, floating brass globe in the center of it, as well as various other trinkets strewn about the room haphazardly.

Paper lanterns in various shades of red, blue, and white float about the observatory, casting a warm yellow glow about the room. Bookshelves line the walls of the foyer-- some of the books look old and worn with age, while others look newer. George swears he can sometimes hear a book shift on its own, but when he turns his head to look, the books are stationery.

He supposes it’s normal fare for an observatory belonging to the Royal Mage.

The staircase spirals up, higher and higher and higher than George expects. From the outside, the observatory hadn’t seemed so big-- but the inside seems far more expansive. He opens his mouth to ask, but Phil interrupts him before the question can even leave his mouth.

“I’ve enchanted this place as well,” Phil says casually. “It was a bit small when I first came, and I had far too much shit-- so instead of throwing it all out, I just made the inside bigger.”

“Oh,” George says awkwardly.

That’s the most he can say on the matter, anyways.

Finally, they reach the top floor.

Like most things George has observed, the telescope that was barely visible from the bottom of the observatory is far bigger here. Up close, it’s far more worn than George would have expected. The wooden frame supporting it looks old with age, the wood appearing close to splintering but held just by a thread. The brass cylinder has smaller smudges towards its center and its base-- clearly showing where Phil had adjusted it so that he could look through it. There’s a large desk next to the telescope, where long parchment scrolls have been stacked on top of it with hastily scribbled notes-- probably about star movements or something.

Towards the corner of the room is a small bed-- it almost looks similar to the bed George has in his old house. It makes his heart squeeze a little with longing.

The walls are lined with more books. They appear a bit more worn, a bit more broken in, their spines having small indents where they must have been flipped open and used for prolonged periods of time.

In the center of the room is a circular table with several crystal balls floating around it. Even as George stares around at the observatory’s top floor, too busy entranced in its details-- Phil has already placed a few tea leaves into a porcelain teapot and has begun to fill it with hot water.

“So, what had you wanderin’ around the castle this late, anyhow?” Phil cocks an eyebrow at George as he continues to busy himself making the tea.

George’s mouth runs dry.

*I can’t just tell him it was from a nightmare. I barely know him.*

“It was a nightmare, wasn’t it?”

George snaps his head up towards Phil. *How did he know that?*

“You were screamin’ it at me, basically,” Phil says. He smiles wanly. “I try not to read people’s minds often. A bit invasive, I think-- but I didn’t even have to try with you; your face gave it away. You’re pretty damn expressive, y’know that?”

George swallows.

“I-yeah. Okay,” George murmurs.

“Take a seat,” Phil says, gesturing to the seat across the table. “If y’wanna talk about it, you can-- no pressure. But the tea takes a bit t’ steep.”

George pulls out the chair, sitting down in it. It *feels* old. Every subtle shift he makes in the chair causes a loud creaking noise. Or maybe it’s loud because of the silence.

Phil isn’t saying anything.

He’s simply watching the teapot with a passive glance, focusing on... what, exactly? The details of the pot? George turns his head to look at it-- the pot has delicate clover detailing on it, much like the insignia of the royal family. Of the crown. In thin golden cursive calligraphy is the word ‘fortuna’.

George swallows.

“It’s just,” George starts slowly. “That... I didn’t want this. And-and now all of this is just-- happening to me and I dunno what to do. Feels like-- like everyone’s just gonna keep starin’ at me until I mess up or something. I didn’t want to be king. I just-- I just wish I was back home, where everything was simpler. So I wouldn’t have to-to worry about it. So I wouldn’t-I wouldn’t feel like...” *Like everything I’m doing as king will just make me hate myself more.*

Phil gives George a sympathetic smile.



“Well, startin’ with the obvious-- I think it’s fine to be overwhelmed with all of this. Completely natural that y’are. And it’s understandable to miss home. I’m not sure what it feels like-- I don’t want t’speak over you and your feelings, things like that,” Phil bats a hand as he snaps his fingers once more, causing the teapot to float into the air. As he puppets the teapot towards a matching teacup, he continues to speak. “I don’t want you thinkin’ that this isn’t normal. That your feelings should be shoved down or whatever.”

George watches as the teapot angles downwards, pouring tea into the teacup.

“An’ maybe it doesn’t get easier,” Phil says. “Maybe it gets harder. Depends on what kinda king you want to be. But even me-- I didn’t start out like this.” He waves a hand with a small smile. “I started out thinkin’ magic was a bunch of bullshit. That learning about it-- training to become better at it... pointless, really. But things change. My attitude towards magic changed.”

He pauses.

“Not to say I haven’t made mistakes,” Phil adds. “I’ve-- made decisions that I’ve had to live with. Both good and bad. But ultimately-- they were my choices. My point being... even though you’re king-- you’re still you. Your decisions are your own, and ultimately-- *you* are the one who makes them. At the end of the day, that’s the best we can do. Be true to ourselves. Live without regretting most of what we’ve done.”

He coughs a little.

“Alright, I’ve done enough talking. Drink some of that-- it’s goin’ t’get cold.”

George eyes the teacup with an appraising look. The tea is a dark, almost yellow-ochre in color. The teacup matches the teapot with thin golden details of a clover and small vines. George reaches to pick it up, his hands shaking. The teacup rattles on its plate, and his face flushes.

Phil laughs.

George takes a sip from it.

The tea is almost scalding, but other than that, it doesn’t taste bad. It’s almost floral. George hasn’t had much tea in his life-- mostly because he couldn’t find any justification for spending money on

it. Phil pours out a cup for himself, floating the teapot onto the table with a soft *thunk* when he's done.

George doesn't know what he should say to that.

It helps a little, he supposes.

"Thanks," George murmurs.

"You don't have to thank me, really-- I'm just statin' the obvious," Phil says casually, leaning back in his seat and taking a sip of his tea. "But it looked like you needed to hear it."

George looks down at his teacup.

"I just," George tries to say. "I-- I just wonder... god. It's weird, but I just-- I wonder what my family would think. If they saw me like this. I'm just-- all I wanted," George feels the words catch in his throat. "I wanted to be *ordinary*. That's-that's it. I didn't... I don't want some kind of fancy destiny being thrust on me. And I feel like that's just-- all this is."

Phil hums.

His gaze is cast towards the ceiling, observing the stars dotting the ceiling.

Phil looks back down, his gaze piercing George.

"I think your parents--" Phil hums contemplatively again, drumming his fingers against the table. "Well, I don't know them. But maybe they would be proud of you. To see that you've pushed through this. No matter how small that progress has been."

George thinks of his mother, with her small hands and kind face.

And his father, with his large smile and sturdy frame.

Would they be proud of him?

...

That's the thing, isn't it? He's not even sure anymore.

George watches his wobbly reflection in the tea.

It blinks back at him, its brows pressed and bottom lip jutting out.

"Thank you, Phil," George murmurs.

"No problem," Phil says. His gaze looks misty, as if focusing on something far beyond George's view. But his gaze refocuses, staring at George as if he's reading every bit of him. Seeing into him, past, present, and future. "You finished with that tea? It's pretty late, but I'd suggest getting at least a lil' bit of sleep."

George looks down.

"Yeah, I-I think I'm good," George says shakily. "Thank you again, Phil. Can-can you give me the directions back to... my bedroom?"

He doesn't want to call it his. The word catches in his mouth, leaving a bitter aftertaste.

"Yeah, of course." Phil snaps his fingers again, and a hazy image of the palace in birds' eye view appears in midair. George watches as Phil traces out a path from the observatory back to the king's bedroom. "Do you need a physical map? I could give you one if you want."

George shakes his head.

"No, thank you. I'll... make my way back."

Phil nods.

“Alright, Your Majesty.” Phil stands up, giving George a slight bow. George grimaces a little. “Be well.”

George nods, walking towards the stairs and heading back down.

George can't help but think that Phil's gaze was once again focused on something far beyond what George can perceive.

But it doesn't matter to him now.

His heart feels lighter than it has in the scant days he's spent in the palace. His feet almost drag against the floor now, the exhaustion of having woken up so early into the night getting to him.

For a furtive second, he wonders if he can ask Dream to sleep in.

*That's ridiculous*, George thinks immediately afterwards.

He doesn't know how long he spent in Phil's company, nor how long he spent wandering the halls on his way back to the bedroom. But by the time he reaches the blue doors marking the entrance to the bedroom, the sun has already started to creep in. It bathes everything in a pale yellow glow, illuminating the dust motes in the air.

George pulls open the door as quietly as he can, shutting it behind him with as much care as he can, when suddenly--

“*Your Majesty!*”

George whirls around to find Dream already alert and awake, dressed in his light armor. His hair is tousled, and in the pale glow of the bedroom, the stray locks of hair sticking up from his head are illuminated. He almost looks... angelic. But George tries not to dwell on that immediate thought.

“Fortuna, where the hell *were* you? I woke up and you-you weren’t there, I thought--” Dream runs a hand through his hair, his gaze almost frantic. “I thought you were gone!”

“No, ‘m...” George rubs at his eye. “I’m fine, Dream. I just took a walk.”

“A *walk*? By *yourself*?!” Dream says, his voice pitching higher. “You could’ve gotten *hurt* or-- or *attacked* !”

George winces a little.

“George,” Dream says with a bit of desperation. “You look awful. Did you get-did you get *any* sleep? Where did you *go* --”

“Look,” George gets out. “It’s fine, alright? I’m fine. I’m back. Sorry for worrying you.”

Dream’s lips part as if he wants to say more.

But he holds his tongue, and slumps his shoulders.

“Alright, Your Majesty,” Dream sighs. “Eret’s going to have a field day with this... they’ll see it in the morning.”

“Great,” George says with a note of sarcasm to his voice.

There’s a pause where neither of them say anything.

“Well,” Dream rubs at his arm anxiously. “Where did you even wander off to?”

“Oh,” George sighs. “I just went to go walk off my headache, s’all.”

Dream seems slightly dejected at that answer. “But you were gone for like, an hour? Did you

seriously walk around the castle for an *hour*?”

“Well, that was my plan initially-- but the Royal Mage found me ‘n took me in for some tea.” George carefully leaves out mentioning the discussion they had.

Dream physically relaxes.

“Oh, thank Fortuna, you were just with Phil.” Dream shifts his posture to something less stiff, less tightly-wound. “Did you get to see the inside of his tower?”

George is thankful for the change in topic. “Yeah, it doesn’t look nearly as cool on the outside as it does on the inside.” He gestures with his hands lazily. “S’fuckin’ huge on the inside, too.”

His description of the tower coaxes a small, high-pitched wheeze out of Dream.

“Very true, Your Majesty.” Dream sends a weak smile over to George. “I’ve only been in there a few times, but I remember it being just as grand as you just so *elegantly* described.” There’s a teasing lilt to the tone of his voice towards the end of his sentence.

George laughs meekly at Dream’s words. “Don’t tease me, you dick. I’m tired, my brain isn’t exactly working too well.” He rubs at his eyes blearily. “M’headache didn’t go away fully, it’s still lingering a bit.”

Dream walks over to him, grabbing his arm and leading him back over towards George’s side of the bed.

“Then try and get some sleep, Your Majesty.” He sits George down on the surface of their bed. “I’ll be sure you’re awake before Eret comes in to get you ready for the day.” Dream gives George a reassuring grin.

“But, aren’t you tired? Why don’t you come back to bed as well?”

“Oh,” Dream lets out a sheepish chuckle. “I... may have worked myself up a bit worrying over where you’d gone. I don’t think I’ll be able to get back to bed after that big of an adrenaline boost--

don't worry though; I'll go do some errands I've been needing to get done."

George wants to protest further, but can't find the energy to speak out on it. He feels himself getting gently pushed to lay down, and barely acknowledges the sheets being pulled up to cover his body as slowly loses a grip on his consciousness.

"Sweet dreams, George." Is the last thing George heard before sleep pulls him back under.

## Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed this chapter! I especially love Philza a lot :]

Let us know your thoughts, feelings, questions, all that stuff down in the comments!

Thank you for the kudos and the bookmarks and make sure to check us out on our social medias ^^b

Once again thank you so much for the support on Lucky Charm. It's been phenomenal!

## Chapter 8

### Chapter Summary

He glances at his reflection once more in the mirror.

It looks back at him curiously.

He still isn't used to this.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Oh, sweet Fortuna, you didn't tell me he was going to look like *this!*”

George's eyes flutter open to find Eret peering down at George with a scandalized look along with Dream, who looks vaguely flustered and somewhat sheepish.

“I-I said he didn't get much sleep--”

“*HE LOOKS LIKE HE'S BEEN RUN OVER WITH A CARRIAGE!*” Eret screams. George winces a little, the sound ringing in his ears. “Oh, Fortuna, I've got my work cut out for me *again* -- and he's getting his portrait done today, too! We can't be capturing this--” Eret's hand reaches out to touch George's face. George instinctively intercepts Eret's hand by grabbing their wrist, and a look of realization comes across Eret's face. “Sorry, Your Majesty. Can you sit up for me, please?”

George groans. He processes approximately none of the words Eret just spewed. It might as well be in one ear, out the other.

“Don't feel like it,” George grumbles. “I was having a nice rest--”

“Your Majesty,” Dream says patiently. “Come on. Get up now.”

George groans again, rolling his eyes before sitting up on the bed, rubbing at his eyes blearily.

“*Fuck*,” George groans. “How long was I asleep?”



“An hour, give or take,” Dream responds.

George blinks.

“Feels like I haven’t slept at all, honestly,” George murmurs. His head has stopped hurting, though, which is a small mercy.

“Sorry,” Dream says.

“It’s not your fault?” George says, raising an eyebrow.

“Uh-- yeah, I know,” Dream responds, a hint of irritation creeping into his voice as his brow furrows a little. “Just-- just felt like saying sorry that you didn’t get a good night’s sleep, is all? Like, you know, fr--”

“Oh-kay then,” Eret says cheerfully, clasping their hands together. “If you two are *quite* done, I’ve got to work my magic on His Majesty over here, and *you* need to keep watch outside!” Eret grabs onto Dream’s shoulders, swiveling him around before half-pushing, half-shoving him out the door. “I swear, castle melodrama will be the *end* of me--”

“Hey, what--” Dream tries to protest, but he’s cut off the moment Eret slams the door in his face.

Eret fumbles with the latch, locking the door.

The handle jiggles.

“Shit,” Eret swears. “I forgot I’d told my assistants to come here as well. And now your knight can’t get in because I’ve locked the door.”

George blinks.

“Well, if an assassin comes in through the window and stabs you, at least you’ll look nice,” Eret says cheerfully. “Come on, Your Majesty-- I’ve got a lot of work on my hands. I think... hm.” Eret halts in their steps, turning around and giving George a once-over. “I think I’ll probably style your

hair back. And we're going to have to do something about those under-eye circles. And... oh, well, I'll stress the details when I get there."

Eret strolls over to a cart close to the doorway, leaning down to fetch a large wooden box. They huff a little-- was the box really *that* heavy? It doesn't--

Eret drops the box on the room's vanity with a loud *thud*.

*Huh, I guess it really is that heavy.* George notes to himself, watching as Eret opens up the box and displays a multitude of...

"What the hell is that," George says, more like a command.

"Oh, this? Powders and such. Makeup, basically. I use this for the princess a lot of the time, but I'm thinking for today, it would come into *great* use for you," Eret says with a smile. "After all, your face-- the real canvas here, should be *flawless*."

"Oh," George stammers. "I-I've never... I've never *had* makeup put on me before--"

"Oh, don't worry about it," Eret says, waving a hand. "I'm sure it'll turn out fine. First time for everything, after all! But before that, we have to get you into your outfit. It's just a temporary thing-- you'll wear the other outfit I've designed for you for most other things, but this is the *real* shebang. My magnum opus, perhaps? No, wait. I'm still too young to have made any *real* magnum opuses..." Eret taps at their chin, a low and contemplative hum leaving their lips. "Well, anyways! I still think it's good."

All George can really do is stare.

Eret's talkative.

Not that it's a bad thing, don't get him wrong-- but they're talkative enough that he doesn't know how to respond.

Why does it seem like everyone in the palace is a chatterbox?

Eret turns around with a bundle of clothes in hand.

“Alright, Your Majesty-- I’ve got these for you. I’ll turn around while you change into these, okay?” Eret says. “They’re pretty self-explanatory to put on, so you can go ahead and switch your clothes.”

George nods shakily, taking the bundle of clothes from Eret’s hands.

“Thank you, Eret,” George says.

Eret gives George a smile.

“No problem, Your Majesty.”

The outfit is... fancier than George expects. A black jacket decorated with golden clover accents and a golden sash and glimmering golden cuffs, black pants with a long ribboned belt, and once again, a set of high-heeled shoes. George looks down at himself, adjusting the bottom of the jacket. It hugs the contours of his body far more closely than he’s comfortable with. He wonders if this is going to be some kind of ongoing thing.

“Oh, you look absolutely stunning,” Eret crows. “Truly one of my best works, I think.”

“I-- uh. It’s nice,” George says falteringly. “Thank you, Eret, really--”

He glances at his reflection once more in the mirror.

It looks back at him curiously.

He still isn’t used to this.

“I think it looks wonderful, too.” George lies. The handiwork and care that had been put into it is admirable, sure, but George can’t help but feel it’s an entirely incorrect fit for him. Eret’s smile is more wan, and they giggle softly.

“You don’t need to lie for my sake, Your Majesty,” Eret says. “You’re as easy to see through as tulle.”

George flushes a little, his fist clenched.

Hot shame flows through his body.

It feels like he’s been stabbed right in the gut with a sword made of ice. It spreads through him, chilling him to the bone.

“I-I’m not lying,” George says.

Eret hums, their eyes softening.

“Alright, Your Majesty. Whatever you say,” Eret says with a somewhat forlorn smile. The smile grows brighter after a moment, and Eret gestures to a chair in front of the bedroom’s vanity. “Sit down, I’ve got to do your makeup.”

George nods, pulling out the chair before settling himself on it, watching as Eret opens up the wooden box full of makeup supplies, retrieving a large powder puff, some brushes, a glass panel, and a few jars.

“Hm,” Eret says. “I think I should probably conceal those under-eye circles first. What do you think, Your Majesty?”

“Uh--” George swallows. “No opinion.”

“Well, that’s fine. I think I’ll go ahead and do that...” Eret unscrews two of the jars, dipping a brush into one of them. When the brush comes out, it’s coated with an almost paint-like substance-- and George flinches a little as a sickly-sweet rose scent wafts through the room. “It’s just foundation, Your Majesty-- don’t be too worried.” Eret picks up the glass panel, depositing the foundation on to it. As Eret dips the brush into another pot, they speak once more. “I think I’ll probably have to mix your shade-- you’re far paler than I expected-- when I first saw you, I swore you were a farmhand... didn’t you ever tan?”

“Oh, I-- I usually wore gloves and... I had a hat when the sun was too much,” George says as Eret leans in close, applying the foundation right under George’s under-eyes. He struggles not to flinch

as Eret smooths out the foundation with their fingers, their fingers almost too warm and too cold at the same time.

“Hmm... interesting. Oh, your skin’s *so* nice--” Eret gushes. “I’m almost jealous.”

“I-- thank you?” George says, somewhat confused.

“You’re very welcome,” Eret responds with a beaming smile.

George doesn’t know how to respond after that.

Eret continues work in somewhat awkward silence, with George sat stiff in the chair while Eret applies the foundation to his face.

“Alright,” Eret says finally, taking a step back. “There we go, perfect. I’ll set that with some powder and then we can move onto the *fun* part. Which is the lips, most obviously.”

George does not have enough experience to know whether Eret is right about that or not.

At the very least, he can’t help but feel like a fake waxwork idol.

Something to be molded with someone else’s ideals in mind.

George watches as Eret slips the gigantic powder puff onto their hand, dipping it into another open jar. As powder spills out of the open lip, another sickly-sweet floral scent wafts through the room. Lavender this time. Eret leans down, pressing the powder across George’s face. Some of the powder manages to get stuck in George’s nose, and he sneezes softly out of reflex.

Eret starts laughing, leaning back and covering their mouth as their shoulders begin to tremble with barely-repressed laughter.

“S-sorry,” George stammers out.

“No, don’t be sorry, that was funny, I-- oh, dear,” Eret says. “Don’t worry, Your Majesty. It’s okay, totally normal-- you should’ve seen the princess-- she’d sneezed so much the first time I put powder on her. I’m surprised you didn’t sneeze earlier.”

George blinks a little as Eret stows the powder puff back into the box along with the jar of powder.

“Alright, so we’ll have to let that sit for a while. In the meantime, I’m going to comb your hair back--” Eret pulls out a comb, brushing some of the tangles out of George’s hair. George sits, letting Eret adjust his hair. Eventually, Eret pulls back with a soft hum, giving George a scrutinizing look. “Alright, I think that’s good.”

George looks at his reflection in the mirror.

His hair has been rearranged slightly to show more of his forehead, his bangs more delicate and separated. He still looks like himself, but-- George still can’t help but feel like his reflection isn’t him. Not as he really is. Not as he really *wants* to be, at least.

He’s suddenly shocked back to reality by a small brush sweeping away the powder under his eyes.

Eret’s face is furrowed in concentration as they brush the excess powder from George’s face, storing the brush back into the box once they’re done.

“Alright, home stretch, Your Majesty!” Eret says cheerfully. The tailor picks up a smaller brush, dipping it into another pot. The brush is coated with something that appears dark yellow, but George is willing to bet that the color is red. He doesn’t bring it up, though. “Part your lips for me?”

“W-what for?” George asks, his voice wavering from nervousness.

“Well it’d be kind of difficult applying this if you didn’t,” Eret wiggles the brush in their fingers. “Don’t worry, Your Majesty. It’ll look great, I promise.” They give a patient smile.

He’s not convinced by what Eret’s saying. But, apprehensively, George parts his lips a smidge.

“Wider than that, Your Majesty, come now,” Eret says with a bit of a teasing lilt to their voice.

“This doesn’t have lead in it.”

George’s mouth parts open, and Eret hums a little as they start to paint his lips with gentle brushing motions, occasionally reaching up with a hand to blend out the rouge evenly. Eventually they take a step back, giving George another scrutinizing look.

“Alright, I think that’s good. Some gloss, maybe? No, for sure,” Eret says, seemingly mostly to themselves. “Mm... your face is in desperate need of some color... I thought the red could’ve worked initially, but... oh, I know!” Eret rummages through the box again, pulling out a smaller pot. After hastily unscrewing the lid and throwing it aside, they swirl their index and middle finger in the pot. “I think maybe... oh, you would look *really* nice with a plum shade. Maybe dark berry. I asked Bad for a name for this shade, and he said *burgundy berry* and at the time I laughed in his face, but it’ll work, I think.”

Eret swipes on the balm, distributing the color evenly.

“Your lips are already naturally pigmented, Your Majesty-- but I think the contrast here is *really* nice, take a look,” Eret says, gesturing towards the mirror.

For a second, his reflection looks like a stranger in its entirety.

Dark hair, dark eyes, dark lips--

Well, not exactly dark. Eret has managed to create a slight tinted gradient, darker from the center of his lips fanning outward. It’s--

His reflection still-- it *is* him, it blinks back at him, and the sharp inhale of breath he takes through his nose is mirrored by it, but--

He feels like he’s going to be sick.

He feels overcast and bleak, like an ocean full of debris.

“Alright, one last thing,” Eret says.

“I feel like this has just been a collection of ‘one last thing’s,” George blurts out. He catches Eret snorting a little, immediately turning their back on George to mask their face.

“You’re right, Your Majesty-- you’re right. But this is really the last one. I’ve got a cape for you here!” Eret says cheerfully, fetching a long, furred bolt of fabric from the rack. “Let me put it on for you.”

“I- uh, sure,” George gets out awkwardly as Eret sets the cape on George’s shoulders, tying the tassels into a knot and fastening it with a clover-shaped brooch. The cape is far heavier than George expects, almost unwieldy in its weight as it settles across his shoulders. It almost feels like it’s threaded with lead, throwing him off balance for a second.

“You look absolutely regal, Your Majesty,” Eret says, almost in awe. “Oh, really, this is one of my best works-- for sure. I bet Grian’s going to have a lot of fun with painting the details.”

“What-- *painting*?” George feels a wave of nausea run over him. “What do you mean painting?”

Eret cocks an eyebrow and chuckles. “I told you this morning, Your Majesty. Grian is a very talented painter who’s going to be capturing you to add to the wall of royal portraits today; it’s why I’m getting you especially dolled up.”

“Uh... okay?” George says awkwardly. “I... guess I wasn’t listening,” He clears his throat. “Thank you, Eret. Really. It means a lot.” He lies again. Nausea roils in his gut, heady and sickly. He hates it. He hates all of this. He can appreciate the thought, but--

*Kingship really isn’t for me, is it.*

He can’t seem to convince himself otherwise.

George takes a step, moving towards the door.

He nearly buckles under the weight of the cape. It bears down on him, like Atlas holding up the sky-- a horrible weight on his shoulders. A weight bearing so much meaning that it could bury him whole. George doesn’t think he can stand up to it. Doesn’t think that he can--



“Y-your Majesty,” George hears Dream say.

Dream sounds... awestruck.

George cocks his head in Dream's direction.

Dream's face looks somewhat flushed, and he immediately looks away from George, coughing into his hand.

“What, Dream?” George asks, turning his gaze slightly upward.

“I-- you. You look, uh.” Dream laughs, pressing his face into his hand. “You look--”

“Is-is that good or bad,” George stutters out, a slight laugh leaving his lips.

“Hey, it-it's good,” Dream says. “I... you.... You look nice. Different. But... it's nice.”

George feels heat rising in his face. He juts his lower lip forward, tugging on the cuffs of the black jacket.

“I-- thank you, I-I guess. Can we head out now?” George asks. “I-I don't know where this whole-- portrait thing is... taking place.” The words hang heavy on his lips.

“Grian likes working in more-- natural lighting, so I think he's at... the walled garden, right?” Dream states, phrasing the end more like a question as he looks at Eret.

“Yes, that's where he is. And I'd suggest you head over there quickly,” Eret says as they begin to wheel their cart away. “Paintings in natural light are *so* hard to capture.”

“Yeah, got it,” Dream says. “Even though-- I... have no idea how paintings work. Come on, Your Majesty-- follow me.”

They head down the hallway, past sights that are now far more familiar than they have any right to be. As they begin heading down the spiral staircase, the cape has settled to the point that it's

starting to hurt from where it's been laid across George's shoulders.

The silence is deafening, only interrupted by the sounds of footsteps through the hallways.

Dream coughs.

"I-I thought you'd be more angry about all of this, honestly," Dream says. "Like-- when you slapped me after I told you to calm down." He wheezes out a laugh at the end, brushing a stray tear from the corner of his eye. "I thought you'd be reacting like that when-- when Eret first--"

"Look," George interrupts, reaching up to scratch at the back of his neck. "I-- I'm just... too tired to deal with it. It's not worth getting angry over."

It's a gritted-out lie.

The truth is somewhere in an uneasy middle-- he's tired, yes, but arguing with Eret and by extension the entire tradition of the royal family would've made him sick.

Dream gives George an appraising look, raising an eyebrow.

"You sure? I just think--"

"*Maybe* you don't know me as well as you think," George snaps.

He almost has half a heart to regret it when Dream looks taken aback by George's harsh tone.

Dream runs his hand over his face, taking a deep sigh.

"Sorry, I guess," Dream murmurs with some bite to his voice.

George isn't sure whether he should say sorry or not.

Would it fix anything? Would saying sorry *help* anything?

George thinks not.

They stop in front of a large iron gate leading to an outdoor area. The garden is sunny-- not obnoxiously so, but bright enough that the glare reflecting off the shiny leaves of flowers and bushes that George can't recognize is still distracting. From what George can see, an area has already been laid out where the painter-- was Grian the name Eret used? George isn't too sure-- is already setting out his palettes and brushes and supplies. Dream pushes open the gate, stepping back to allow George to step through.

"After you, Your Majesty," Dream says softly.

George takes a step out into the garden.

The sunlight shines on his face. In the clothes as he's in right now, he's uncomfortably warm. Not bad, but still. As he tips his head upwards, squinting a little at the sun. The sun stabs at his eyes, blades of light dappling across the grassy field. He feels like buckling. But he can't. He's forced forward like a marionette dangled by an uncaring hand.

Dream follows closely behind, stopping at a bush that George can't make out in his periphery.

"'Ello, Your Majesty!" he hears a voice say. He turns to see the painter-- Grian-- waving from behind a large easel and canvas. "Oh, Eret really did a number on you, didn't they? Wait. I'm getting ahead of myself-- I'm Grian. The royal painter-- and I'm in charge of portraits. But I think we already know that." Grian laughs a little, gripping the edge of his easel for support. "Ah, anyways. Can you stand over there? I'm going to see what lighting is best."

George steps awkwardly over to the area Grian gestured to-- right in front of a bush of what appear to be light blue roses. It's strange. He's not sure whether those actually exist-- maybe they do? But he doesn't want to ask about the true color for fear of embarrassing himself. As he steps in front of them, their flowery scent wafts around him, sweeter than the sickly flowery scent Eret always seems so fond of.

"Oh, that's good," Grian says, smiling and throwing a casual thumbs-up. "Can you put your hand on your hip? Lean your weight on your right foot, like this," Grian stands up, mimicking the pose. George nods warily, setting his hand on his hip and leaning a little to the right. Grian hums, raising his fingers up to frame George in a rectangle. "Thank you, Your Majesty. I'll try to make this quick... natural lighting is always so finicky, but I find it pays off."

George has no experience with painting, so he can't say whether Grian is right or not.

Instead, he just hums uneasily and lets Grian get to work.

The painter works in somewhat pointed silence, the only sounds in the silence being the scraping of the palette knife against the palette and the brushes against rough canvas.

Occasionally, Grian hums a little or comments about the weather or the sun or the wind.

"The sun's being very nice to me today, Fortuna willing," Grian says as he continues to paint. "Usually the clouds come in and interrupt everything, but this one's turning out far better than I would expect." Grian dips his brush into a golden-colored paint, making tiny strokes across the canvas. "Turn your head a little more to the side-- I think it would be nice to capture your profile? There we go. Right."

George's head turns to look at a small artificial waterfall, the water splashing into a large pool of clear water with koi fish. His reflection wobbles a little, blinking back at him. The stranger wearing his face isn't him. It *can't* be him. This reflection of him represents everything he hates-- a flimsy, tacky idol, built from pyrite instead of gold because he *knows* he's fake, could *never* amount to real gold, could never be--

*You can never be anything.*

He feels his breath catch in his throat.

It's like he's caught in a casket, an iron maiden--

The cape weighs heavily on him, starting to close in on his shoulders.

It's constricting him.

The spikes start driving deep into his skin, stabbing and reaching for his heart.

His heart is pounding in his ears. His breaths come out uneven.

He can't stay here.

He takes a step forward.

He thinks Grian says something, but he can't be sure.

He feels like he's rapidly sinking underwater, his feet bound by the heaviest iron chains. He can almost feel his breath escaping him, bubbling up into the air. Time screeches to a grinding halt, the slowest blade grinding on the grindstone.

"Your Majesty!"

There's a loud crash.

Time suddenly speeds up again, and George realizes a hand is at his mouth, smearing the dark lip tint across his lower cheek, the other hand deftly undoing the knot of the cape, throwing the brooch across the grassy garden. He thinks he sees Dream in his periphery dropping something on the ground, a small carving knife in hand-- but he can't think about it. He can't bother to think about it.

He grinds to a sudden halt when the corner of his cape catches against the iron gate.

George whirls around, struggling to tug the thing free-- but finds that it's held fast against a spike in the gate.

Footsteps loom closer.

They sound in his ears, the pounding sound almost becoming overwhelming.

*I don't have time for this--*

*I need to get out--*

*Please--*

George throws the cape off.

It's like a great weight has been lifted off his shoulders the moment the cape is free. The iron maiden swings open, letting him go.

And he *runs*.

He doesn't know where he's going.

He nearly slips against the marble floor, reaching out to break his fall with the decorated edge of a sconce, nearly breaking it in the process. George coughs desperately, trying to catch his breath as his chest heaves. He hears a faint voice calling after him, and thinks it must be Dream-- but he can't be seen like this. He doesn't want to be seen like this, he--

*Think.*

*How do I get out--*

He runs through the spiralling, maze-like hallways with more desperation than before-- he doesn't know what the path is.

He just knows he needs *out*.

It's hard to think.

It's hard to remember where he's going, but he manages to find a door.

George slams it open and stumbles outside, nearly collapsing onto his knees in exhaustion.

The sunlight shines down on him, more fiercely than before. The sunlight is like a crashing cymbal, deafening and all-consuming. He tries to blink, focus his vision-- but he can't. He wipes at his eyes, but all he can do is *see* without processing it. His mind isn't working.

"Hey, man, you're not allowed here-- who the hell *are* you? Are you okay? Breathe, for Fortuna's sake--"

George looks up to see a man dressed in all black, a hat obscuring most of his face. In the glare of the sun and the stark shadow of the hat, it's hard to make out the man's facial features and general expression.

"I'm--" George coughs out, collapsing onto his knees as he heaves. "I'm fine, I just need to-- I need to get out of here," he continues as he brings himself to his feet, trying to will himself to move forward and run. "Please, I just--"

"Woah," the man says, holding out both of his hands. And it's at this point George realizes the man's hands are covered with black gloves, reaching up to his elbows. "I really don't think you're in any condition to walk. Or run. Or do whatever the hell it is you're doing. Walk with me; at least answer my questions."

George can't think.

His mind is fogging up more, and his hands almost tingle.

"Are you okay?"

George snaps his gaze to the stranger, the man's expression coming more into view.

The man's dark eyes are narrowed, his brows furrowed.

"Breathe, man, you're gonna hyperventilate. Here, let me--" the man reaches out a hand, extending

two of his fingers before crooking them inwards. At once, it feels like a cooling balm has been applied to George's sternum, and George takes a shaky inhale. "There, alright. Talk to me."

"I-- who *are* you?" George blurts out.

"Alex," the man says. "Or-or, Quackity. That's what... that's what people call me. I guess." Quackity shifts on one foot to the other, turning his head away from George. "Answer my question, man. Who *are* you?"

"I'm-- George," George says.

"Cool," Quackity says, beginning to walk forward. "Walk with me."

"Why?" George asks.

"You wanted out?" Quackity responds, raising an eyebrow. "I'm doing you a favor. And you're gonna answer more of my questions since I don't know who the fuc-- *Fortuna* you are, 'George'."

"I--" George parts his mouth, trying to find words to say, but comes up empty.

"Also, where'd you get--" Quackity raises a finger, gesturing to the lower half of his face. "That smear..."

"Fuck," George swears as he raises a hand to wipe at the lipstick stain. "I-- it's not anything--"

"Here," Quackity says, rummaging through his pocket. He pulls out a white handkerchief, holding it out to George. "For you, *m'lady*." He teases.

George nearly chokes on his breath.

"*Wh*- Where did you-- how do you have this much on you?" George asks as he takes the handkerchief, lifting it to wipe at his cheek. "Like, the spell, and now the handkerchief--"

"Old habits die hard, I guess," Quackity murmurs as he kicks a stone across the dirt path. "Old job needed me to be a babysitter."



“Old job...” George blinks. “Wait! You’re--” How had he not drawn this connection earlier--  
“Quackity, the--”

“Yeah, yeah. Old servant to the late king, whatever,” Quackity grumbles. “Are you done with your questions? Are you going to tell me who you are?”

George swallows.

“Did-did you not--” George starts.

“Did I not *what*,” Quackity says, his voice raising.

“I’m George, the-- the... new king,” George murmurs. The words catch in his throat, resting there uncomfortably. It feels like an ice cube coated with absinthe, spreading into his veins and numbing all of his senses, making his head spin.

The shadow of Quackity’s hat makes it hard to see his expression, but Quackity seems taken aback.

“So you’re--” Quackity tears his gaze away, looking down at the ground. “So *you’re* the new king.” His voice sounds almost sad, resigned. His gaze looks almost... it’s strange to say, but it sounds *resentful*.

“I’m sorry,” George blurts out.

What can he say to this?

Is anything good enough to fill the empty space in their conversation?

George doesn’t know.

“It’s whatever,” Quackity says. “It’s just the order of nature, isn’t it? Feelings don’t get in the way of replacing a cog in the machine.” His voice sounds bitter at the end, stabbing his foot into the

dirt. “When something stops being useful, you just gotta replace it. Regardless of the cost.”

George... doesn’t know how to respond.

“Hey, listen, I--”

George hears a distant door slam open.

Quackity’s eyes go wide.

“Are you being *followed* ?” Quackity demands, his voice laced with a rising panic.

“What? I-- I just, I th--”

Quackity claps his hands together, interlacing his fingers together before breaking them apart and suddenly disappearing altogether.

“ *Your Majesty!* ”

George hears Dream shout.

George knows one thing for certain:

*He absolutely does not want to see Dream.*

He doesn’t want to hear Dream’s pity, doesn’t want to be comforted with cloying, saccharine words.

But there’s nowhere to run. George’s at his wits’ end, physically and mentally. So he succumbs. He stays still, gaze fixated on the ground as he hears Dream approach.

“I *knew* you had to be angrier about all of this,” Dream says. His voice holds no triumph, which is strange. George thinks Dream would’ve been more smug about it. More willing to gloat.

“Don’t talk about me like you *know* me,” George says through gritted teeth.

He hears Dream take a deep breath.

“Seems like I know you a bit better than you want me to, George,” Dream responds, his voice even.

George doesn’t turn around.

“The portrait’s not ruined, by the way,” Dream says. “Grian had enough done to be able to finish it by himself.”

George feels anger slowly starting to bubble in him, like lava pouring out the lip of a volcano.

“It’s not about the *fucking* portrait, Dream,” George says, turning to face Dream. Dream stares at George with a somewhat strained expression. It’s hard to make out what exactly Dream’s emotional state is— but George doesn’t care. “I— fuck. This palace makes me *sick*. Your stupid—the fucking *formalities*, the- the unneeded decorations, it’s all just gilded bullshit on top a rotten frame. It’s just— it’s all *fucking fake!*”

“And what does yelling at me do?”

Dream’s voice trembles a little.

“What does yelling at me prove? I’m just— god, you make this *so* difficult— I’m trying to help you. All I— all *I’ve* done is my job, George!” Dream shouts. “I get it, alright? Heavy is the head that wears the crown, heavy is the hand that bears the weight of the world. I’m— the *least* you could do is make this less difficult for both of us. I just...” Dream covers his face, a choked laugh leaving his lips. “You could’ve just said you hated me, George. Said that you’ve hated every piece of these past few days— that-that would’ve made it— would’ve made it *so* much easier. And to— and to think I would’ve— I would’ve giv— look, whatever. It— I *get it*, George. Truly, I do.”

George feels like he's just had the ground pulled right from under him.

He's not sure what to say.

"I-I'm sorry, I—"

"Forget it," Dream says icily. "It's fine."

"Dream—"

*"I said forget it. It's fine, Your Majesty."*

Dream's eyes shine with something that looks like regret.

Maybe.

But George can't pretend like he knows how to read emotions anymore-- especially not on other people. How could he read another person when he can barely read himself?

"Let's just head back," Dream gets out, turning on his heel before heading back the way he came.

They head back into the palace wordlessly.

George is almost too afraid to ask where they're going.

He's in no position to ask about it.

As they walk past the garden, George spots a pale blue rose lying in the center of the hallway, as if it'd been dropped or misplaced-- it's surrounded by stray thorns, as if they had been pulled off by hand.

Dream spares it nary a glance, crushing it underfoot. A few of the petals split off, scattering across the hallway as he steps forward, his gaze unwavering.

George isn't sure why he feels like his heart has been crushed alongside those petals, compressed between Dream's boot and the marble floor.

It leaves him feeling nauseous for the third time that night.

## Chapter End Notes

please dont troll me in the comments ahaha /ref

Thanks for reading this chapter! Hope you enjoyed it;; the support on Lucky Charm has been ABSOLUTELY phenomenal.

Man, the process of making this chapter was rough; I was actually sick (this is kath writing the notes) on like, Friday-Saturday-a bit through Sunday today, but I wanted to get this chapter out for you guys. Also like, miscellaneous shit that's. Been kinda rough

Please let us know what you think in the comments below, and don't forget to kudos+comment+bookmark+do whatever you want to get the word out about lucky charm etc etc because it would be really cool to share it and stuff :]

More updates coming during winter break

## Chapter 9

### Chapter Summary

How is he going to fix this?

Where can he go from here?

Sleep pulls him under, and George lets his eyes flutter shut.

---

Dream sits up.

Morning.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

George feels like a ship without an anchor. He floats uneasily, his head full of fog. He fumbles with the hem of his coat, wringing it in his hands over and over again.

He and Dream walk in horrible, tensed silence.

Like a tightrope pulled so tightly it's starting to fray.

The bed is cold.

George watches the faint moonlight reflect on the ceiling, turning his head slightly to see Dream curled on his side, turned away from him. George doesn't blame Dream at all, honestly. If their positions were reversed, George doesn't think he'd want to look at Dream, either.

How is he going to fix this?

Where can he *go* from here?

Sleep pulls him under, and George lets his eyes flutter shut.

---

Dream sits up.

Morning.

Dream runs a hand through his hair, resting his head in his hand. Morning light filters through the window, illuminating the dust motes in the room.

He feels a tug on the sheets, and turns his head.

His heart squeezes.

George-- looks so much more peaceful when asleep. Dream watches as George's chest rises and falls rhythmically, watches as George fumbles with a silk pillow in still-asleep fingers.

George has long eyelashes.

Dream slaps himself mentally for noting that about George's sleeping figure. He's trying not to come off like a creep, just in case George wakes up. He's not sure what excuse he could make if George woke up and immediately noted that Dream was just-- staring. A mixture of fondness, exasperation, and irritation floats somewhere high in his ribcage, with just a dash of resentment.

He tries multiple times to avert his gaze-- to look anywhere *but* at George-- but he finds himself returning to his sleeping figure over and over again. In a huff of frustration, he forces himself out of bed and decides to just... go somewhere else.

Something arrests his movement long enough to consider the consequences.

*You can't just leave the king alone*, a quiet voice reminds him.

He can't.

Dream turns to look at George's sleeping figure.

*Leave him.*

Another darker voice whispers in his ear.

*He didn't give two shits when he left in the middle of the night. If he wants to be left alone so badly, he can just take care of himself.*

If Dream was a stronger man, he might've crushed that tiny little devil in his heart that wanted this to hurt.

But Dream isn't strong, really.

So he opens the bedroom door and leaves.

His heart is on fire, burning with building resentment and anger.

*Why did you say that to me?*

*You're selfish.*

*You're so selfish-- to just put all your feelings on me, to expect me to have the answers for your predicament, George-- I can't do anything. I'm just doing what's asked of me. You can't just--*  
Dream shakes his head. Monologuing about this-- to some perception of George-- with warm brown eyes, an uncaring gaze-- it's not going to help him. It's not helping anything.

He finds himself at the forge.

Even in the early morning, it's bustling with activity.



“Put your back into it!”

Dream snaps his head to see Sapnap shouting orders to another man attempting to push a cart of raw iron ore.

“God, you’re such a pussy,” Sapnap says with some exasperation as he leaves his station, pushing the man aside to maneuver the cart with hardly any trouble at all. “Punz, you’re so weak--”

“I am not,” Punz retorts sourly. “You asked me for like, a *ton* of iron ore and I’m only one man.” Punz runs a hand through soot-stained blond hair, a hissed exhalation of breath leaving his lips. The man scans the forge, looking around, right before his eyes meet Dream’s. “Dream, is that you? What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be, like-- what is it you’re doing now? Waiting on the king on hand and foot or whatever?”

“Good to see you too, Punz,” Dream grumbles as he walks over.

Punz was yet again another one of Dream’s old friends who had initially been in knight training, but realized that his calling was somewhere in physical labor. Dream sees him frequently helping out kitchen staff with big loads of dry goods like grain or flour, or as he is now-- helping out Sapnap.

“Dream?” Sapnap says, looking over. “Oh, hey, dude. Fancy seeing you here-- I thought I wouldn’t be seeing you for a bit. Word on the rumor mill is that you got chewed out by the king. You wanna elaborate on that?”

“God, you are *such* a gossip, aren’t you,” Dream retorts. “I’m-- I’m not in the mood to talk about it, Sapnap.”

Sapnap’s gaze softens a little, and the blacksmith rolls up his sleeves.

“Alright, man, your choice,” Sapnap says. “I’m not gonna make you say anything you don’t want to. But if you’re gonna show up, at least do some work for me. That good with you?”

“Sure,” Dream says as he walks over, rolling up his sleeves as well.

“You can help Punz gather some coal,” Sapnap instructs. “I’m working on something for Sam

today. He asked for some rings-- I think he's planning on getting Phil to put a bunch of enchantments on them? He said he wanted to like-- god, it's weird, but a ring that can suck items into it. He wanted one of those, so I'm making the base. I have to use like, a super specific kind of alloy or whatever, and it's actually really cool--"

"Alright, alright," Punz interrupts. "We don't need to hear that whole song and dance, as fascinating as it is--"

"Fuck off," Sapnap snaps. "My forge, my convo'. Unless either of you have anything more interesting to say, you're gonna have to hear me talk about the difference between pulsar and iron alloys. Dream?"

"I-- god, I really just--" Dream starts.

"What's it like working for the king, Dream?" Punz asks. "I haven't seen you around enough to ask."

Dream gives Punz a withering look.

"Listen," Punz says, lifting up his hands, "working for the king's a big honor. Thought I'd just get the first-hand retelling."

"It's--" Dream runs a hand through his hair. "I really don't wanna-- I don't wanna air any dirty laundry or whatever... it's... it's just that it's much harder than it looks. He's-- he's difficult. I can't-- I can't stand him, honestly. I think.."

"As if you'd have it any other way," Sapnap says with a note of fondness in his voice as he begins heating the iron ore. "You never liked things the easy way."

"It's not just that," Dream sighs. "I don't-- I just..." Dream bites the inside of his cheek, wondering how to phrase what he wants to say. His mind is a jumble of thoughts-- George, the kingdom, George again-- and trying to organize it feels like reaching into a pile of hay and pulling out a single silver needle. "The kingdom's not in good shape. There's no-- there's no pretending it isn't. We're one economic collapse away from a peasant revolt-- and... and I don't think George is ready to face that."

Punz and Sapnap are looking at him incredulously.

“What did I say,” Dream deadpans.

“ ‘George’ ,” Sapnap says with a smirk. “Guess you stand him a little more than you wanna admit, Dreamie-poo.”

Dream goes to respond but Punz beats him to the punch. “Yeah dude-- you’ve never been the type to mess up a title like that.”

“No dude, oh my god-- you should’ve seen it, he messes it up *all* the time. It’s the funniest shit--” Sapnap babbles, a labored laugh leaving his lips.

“Fuck off!” Dream sputters loudly. His face heats up, and he immediately reaches up to cover the flush. “That-- Sapnap, stop laughing, that doesn’t mean anything--”

“You’re blushing, you’re *blushing* ! That’s so cute,” Sapnap teases. “You’re so *cute* , Dream--”

“I am *not* !” Dream retorts. “I-- look, the king’s difficult. His Majesty is-- I thought I was understanding him more, and then he just shut me out. It’s been... it’s been awkward. And so much harder than I was expecting... I don’t know if I can-- I really don’t know what I’m going to do.” The sentence dies on his tongue. He feels his gaze beginning to go fuzzy at the edges as he defocuses and stares at the floor awaiting a response.

Dream is snapped back into reality by a warm hand on his shoulder-- it’s the same grounding feeling he’s always gotten from Sapnap. A warm and comforting ember, not hot enough to catch fire, but warm enough to be a pleasant reminder-- a feeling that’s so entirely *Sapnap* . A sense of calm washes over him as he glances up to see a sympathetic smile on his best friend’s face.

“Hey, man. You seem super fuckin’ overwhelmed so I’m just gonna keep it straight with you,” Sapnap makes an odd gesture with his free hand. “No one is making you stay stationed with him-- if you need to leave, then leave.” He offers a reassuring smile, but somehow, it just makes Dream feel infinitely worse.

“Yeah I--” He swallows. “I know. I know no one’s making me stay but I just-- I can’t leave, Sap.” Dream feels pinpricks in his chest as he tries to explain himself. His hands tingle with the phantom effort of keeping himself together. “There’s just-- just something that’s keeping me with him. It-- I don’t know if it’s pride or some dumb shit like that but I just... can’t.”

Sapnap whistles lowly.

“Listen, man. You are the master of your own destiny and assorted cliché shit like that,” Sapnap says, picking up a rough, unhewn gemstone from a pile of stones at his station. “I’m not gonna stop you from doing what you want to do-- just make sure you’re putting yourself first.”

Dream grins uneasily, nodding.

“Yeah, okay, Sapnap,” Dream murmurs.

“That just sounds like you’re trying to get rid of me,” Sapnap says teasingly. “Act like you care about yourself a little more, man. After all...” Sapnap’s expression becomes more serious. “We’ve only got ourselves in the end. You gotta take care of your heart, your soul, first and foremost. Gotta make sure your flame doesn’t go out, that kind of thing.”

Dream blinks.

“God, I forgot how much I hate being philosophical,” Sapnap says with a laugh. “Look, at the end of the day-- I trust you to know what you’re doing for yourself. I’m not gonna like, baby you into your decisions. It’s your life. Just make sure you know what you’re doing.”

“I-- yeah, of course,” Dream says. “I’m not that big of an idiot.”

“Debatable, really,” Punz snickers. “You’ve always worn your heart on your sleeve.”

“*Hey*,” Dream grumbles. “What does *that* mean--”

“It means you’re a softie, Dream,” Punz says with a smile. “Nothing bad.”

“Sure, sure,” Dream says. He turns his head to watch the sky-- the sun shines down, the blue sky dotted with clouds. “Shit.” *How long have I been here?*

“You better get going, Dream,” Sapnap says cheerfully. “I’d hate for you to get in trouble.”

“You know what?” Dream says as he unrolls his sleeves, wiping some of the soot of the forge on his pants. “I’m going to be fine. It’s going to be fine. I’ll-- I’ll see you later, Sapnap. Punz. Thanks for talking to me.”

“No problem, man,” Sapnap says cheerfully. “Come back and visit whenever you’re free.”

“I will,” Dream responds. “Thanks, Sapnap.”

Sapnap waves nonchalantly, and Dream makes his way out of the forge and back into the palace proper. His head feels a little clearer. Not by a lot, but by enough to try and piece together his conflicting emotions, the thoughts rattling around in his head.

*Would it be so bad to leave?* The gentle voice in his mind asks. *After all, there’s so many things you want to do and achieve in life that don’t--*

*I’m not sure,* Dream responds. *I’m not sure.*

*I say you come up with that answer soon, Dream.*

Dream wills his internal monologue to shut up.

“Dream, thank Fortuna-- I... *oh dear* --”

Dream snaps out of his reverie to find Bad running at him, his gaze frantic.

“Bad?” Dream asks, a bit of nervousness entering his tone. “What’s-- what’s up?”

“The king’s missing,” Bad hurries. “From his room. And since you weren’t there, I thought-- well, I guess I should’ve just expected the worst. Do you know where he is?”

“What?” Dream asks, alarm entering his voice. “What do you mean, he’s--”

“What did you expect?” Bad demands, his voice pitching higher. “He’s *gone* , Dream! Can’t you

*find him?"*

"I-- I guess I could try... but I really have no idea where he'd be--"

"At least *pretend* like you know where he is!" Bad whimpers, running a hand through his hair. "I've got to get ready, I can't just-- look, Dream, it-- whatever happened between you two, yesterday-- and before you ask me how I knew, I know because Grian came and informed me of what happened-- please just--" Bad puts his head in his hand, shaking his head a little. "Please just-- I'm not asking for this to be fixed. I'm asking for you two to at least-- put your feelings aside long enough to just-- talk to each other about this. You're the *king's knight*. He's the king. At least-- that-that has to *mean something*. You can't be at each other's throats. I've..." Bad pulls out a pocket watch, flipping it open. "I've wasted too much time just trying to talk to you about this. I have to go. *Find him.*"

Bad walks away, leaving Dream standing confused in the hallway.

Where the hell could George be?

*Is this even worth it?* Dream wonders as he moves through the palace's hallways. Was it worth chasing after something he wasn't even sure he truly wanted? Whatever the case, he's sure that George hasn't gone that far. It's not as if George knows where everything in the palace is-- he'd be hard-pressed to find the shortcuts and hidden nooks and crannies.

As Dream passes by the garden, he fights the growing resentment and shame building within him.

It doesn't work.

As soon as he catches a glimpse of the lavender rose bushes, the urge to put his head into the marble wall becomes almost overpowering.

"Dream. Fancy seeing you here," a voice says.

*Goddammit.*

"Phil," Dream says, a pained smile coming on his face. "What's— what's up, man?"

The Royal Mage is currently observing the lavender roses, the tips of his fingers glowing green as a cut stem from the rose bush starts to lengthen. A soft humming leaves his lips as a rose bud blooms, and Phil lowers his hand.

“I was just lookin’ at the roses,” Phil says cheerfully, cupping his hand around the rosebud. “Funny how there’s just one missing, ‘innit? I wonder who could’ve done that.”

*Scraping away the thorns.*

*Lifting the rose to his nose to take a whiff of the scent and finding it sweet enough—*

Dream’s face flushes.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Dream says stiffly. “And if you’re *quite* done—”

“Fortuna— these roses are just beautiful this time of year, aren’t they?” Phil continues as if he hasn’t heard Dream at all. “They always *do* bloom into the pre’iest shade of lavender at this time of year, don’t they? Is lavender one of your favorite colors, Dream?”

“It— “ He sighs. “Phil, if you’ve got a point you’re making, come out and say it,” Dream says, his voice reaching just the right tone of desperation. “ *Please* .”

“I’m just sayin’,” Phil says in mock defense. “Clearly, *someone* put enough effort into trimming the thorns, too. It almost makes me—”

“Phil,” Dream grits out.

“It almost makes me believe in love at first sight,” Phil says teasingly.

Dream feels the fight leave his body.

“Are you quite done, Phil?” Dream asks. “Can I— Can I *go* now?”

“Well, you could have left quite a bit ago, Dream,” Phil murmurs as his hand starts to glow faintly green again, and the lavender rose begins to bloom. “I haven’t rooted you in place or anything.”

*Oh.*

“These roses wouldn’t be roses without their thorns, you know?” Phil says conversationally, thumbing at the lavender bud’s thorns gently. “You can’t have something beautiful without thorns. It’s bound to prick. Or hurt at some point. And obviously if it hurts too much, that’s no good-- but it’s only natural to hurt. Only a fool would strip a rose of its thorns for the sake of ease.”

Dream... feels like the wind has been knocked out of his lungs.

“I-- alright,” Dream murmurs quietly. “I’m... I’m just going to-- I’m going to find the-the king now, if you don’t mind.”

“Go ahead,” Phil says. “I’m just about done here, too-- I was headin’ to the dining hall for breakfast, actually.” As he brushes past Dream, Dream hears a soft murmur. “He’s out in the fields by that old apple tree.”

Dream whirls around, his lips parting to ask Phil what he means-- but Phil is already halfway down the hallway, and the words die on Dream’s tongue.

*The apple tree?*

The only apple tree in the royal fields-- Dream wasn’t any stranger to it-- he’d spent so many sunny afternoons playing at it with Sapnap, climbing up its trunk and picking the sweet fruit from its branches. The tree represents a simpler time to Dream-- something tall and constant, unchanging. Something that he *knows* .

But why is George there?

It’s not like George would know what the tree means to Dream.



The wind picks up as soon as Dream enters the fields.

Dream scans around, looking for the apple tree.

He finds it almost immediately, right where it always is. It should be any old tree, completely unremarkable-- and yet George standing in front of it makes Dream's heart squeeze in an unpleasant way, like pouring salt over an open wound and watching it *curl* .

Dream heads down the field, crossing the grassy expanse.

George is sitting on the ground, hugging his legs to his chest, his back pressed up against the tree. His gaze is downcast, focused on the grass. Dream watches as George rips out one of the strands of grass, pressing it taut against his lips. A soft, whistling note leaves George's lips.

The melody that George is playing almost sounds... familiar.

But Dream can't be bothered to figure out what it is.

He approaches closer, tentative and slow.

"Hey," Dream says. "What are you doing out here, Your Majesty?"

It's comical how quickly George jumps out of his skin, looking up at Dream with a mixture of fright and apprehension. The look slowly dissipates, and George shrugs a little.

"It's too big," George murmurs. "The palace." He blows on the strand of grass again, the whistling note once again piercing the air. "Needed out."

Dream pauses.

He gestures next to George, a nervous smile on his face.

“Can I-- can I sit? Next to you, I mean.”

George shrugs.

“Do whatever,” George says, looking away from Dream.

Dream struggles not to feel slightly irritated, but he sits down next to George awkwardly.

The tension is so thick Dream thinks that he'd be able to cut it open with his sword.

“Listen,” George says suddenly.

Dream turns to look at George. George's brow is furrowed, his bottom lip jutting out a little as his fist clenches.

“I-- I'm sorry,” George murmurs. “I shouldn't have said... what I said back then. I-I wasn't-- I wasn't thinking at all. And I hurt you.” George's gaze glimmers with something vaguely resembling guilt. It's a strange, vulnerable thing-- an expression that Dream has never seen before on George's face.

“It's-- you don't have to forgive me,” George adds hurriedly. “There's-- there's no excuse for what I said, and you have every right to be angry at me. I just... if I didn't say anything, it was gonna eat me up inside.”

Dream feels like the wind has left his lungs yet again.

*How is it that he's able to just--*

*With so few words, just take me apart like this?*

“It,” Dream tries. “It's okay, Your Majesty. Well... it-it's not, I guess, but I screwed up too. I interpreted the whole thing wrong... and I shouldn't have said those things to you either. I'm-I'm sorry too.”

George gives Dream a small smile, the corners of his eyes crinkling a little.

“Yeah, I-- I figured. We both said things we-we regretted,” George murmurs.

The conversation lulls a little.

“You know I don’t hate you, right?” George says. “I-- I don’t like, dislike you either. I guess I just... I tolerate you. It’s not-- I really don’t think I could hate you, even after you knocked me out.”

George laughs sheepishly, covering his eyes with his hand. Dream feels something warm blossom deep in his chest, and a little laugh leaves his lips, despite himself.

“Yeah, I know,” Dream says. “I don’t dislike you either. I guess I can ‘tolerate you’ as well. Even after you slapped me across the face.”

“I’m-- fuck, alright, I’m sorry for that too--” George begins, but Dream waves him off with a nonchalant hand.

“No, don’t be sorry. It’s fine,” Dream says. “It didn’t really hurt anyways. It was kinda funny looking back on it.”

George slumps his shoulders, looking back down at the ground. One of his hands reaches out to trace small circles into the dirt.

“So-- like,” George starts.

“Um,” Dream murmurs. “I-- look.” He claps his hands together, giving George what he *thinks* is more of a stern look. “We don’t-- you don’t have to like me. We don’t really-- we don’t *have* to like each other. But we’ve gotta spend so much time together anyway-- so it wouldn’t hurt to...just get along. Does... does that sound fair?”

George hums. His eyes glimmer a little, clearly mulling it over before he nods.

“Yeah,” George says. “Sounds fair, Dream.”

Dream smiles a little.

The silence becomes a little more comfortable. There’s room to breathe in it.

“We should get going,” Dream says. “I think Bad is expecting you.”

“Huh,” George murmurs. “Okay, yeah. Let’s go.”

Dream pulls himself up, stretching a little before turning around and outstretching his hands to George.

“Shall we?” Dream tries.

George reaches out his hands, but hesitates somewhat. His gaze looks contemplative, almost wary.

“I’m not gonna hurt you, George,” Dream says.

George rolls his eyes before reaching out and grabbing Dream’s hands, and Dream tugs a little, pulling him up from the ground; like a particularly stubborn vine or weed. George’s hands are much smaller than Dream expects. His hands are warm and soft, his fingertips and palms slightly callused. It’s not that Dream didn’t expect it, but George is-- so warm, so warm he *scalds*-- and he’s just... so, *so* real.

Dream has to pull himself out of his own mind before he accidentally does something he’s going to regret.

“Can you let go now,” George murmurs. “Uh-- you’re kinda-- you’re, uh, squeezin’ my hands a little hard...”

“Oh--! Oh. Uh-- shit. Sorry,” Dream gets out. “I-- I didn’t mean to, uh--”

“No, it’s-- it’s fine, let’s just...” George drops his hands from Dream’s, looking away. If Dream was a wiser man, which he isn’t, he would have tried not to notice the red flush slowly rising on George’s cheeks, a red madder stain on porcelain skin. “Let’s just go.”

“Yeah,” Dream echoes. “Let’s... just go.” He absentmindedly wipes the hand George just released on his trousers, curiously noting how sweaty his palm had become.

It’s not better, not by a long shot.

But it feels like a weight Dream didn’t even know he was carrying has been set down, and his step feels so much lighter.

*It’s going to be okay.*

Or at least, he hopes so.

## Chapter End Notes

merry christmas

the way i speedran to get this out before Christmas ended in EST is like, so unfunny  
but like whatever am I right fellas

i hope you enjoyed this shift in perspective, we'll be following dream for one more  
chapter after this and then we'll go back to our regularly scheduled george content  
thank you for the support on lucky charm. it's been absolutely phenomenal and I have  
loved being in this community so much

from the lucky charm council, THANK YOU.

## Chapter 10

### Chapter Summary

“Pass me a sword.” George shakes his head and gestures to the small pile of spare swords Dream has tossed off to his side with a furrowed brow.

Dream’s mouth hangs agape. “What?” He genuinely doesn’t believe what he just heard. He lets out a chuckle in disbelief. “*What did you say?*”

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Does... Bad want to see us?” George asks.

Dream hums noncommittally, tucking his free hand into his pocket.

“I don’t think so?” Dream says. “I-- he just asked me to find you. And-and I have, so... I dunno. He never specified whether he needed to see us or anything, he just said he needed to get ready for the day. I think we should probably be fine-- and if it turns out we aren’t, you can blame me.”

George scoffs.

“Alright then,” George says. “If Bad asks, I’ll say it was all your fault.”

Dream snickers.

“Yeah, alright,” Dream says. “I’m fine with that.”

It’s strange, joking around with George now.

Their tension hasn’t dissipated. It’s still there, humming below the surface. It’s evident in the way George’s gaze fixates away from him, the way George’s hands fumble with the edge of his clothes, grasping for something. For *anything*. Dream thinks it’s like George is scrambling for leverage against quicksand, but he also can’t pretend to know what the king thinks.

Dream can't find it in himself to forget George's words, can't find it in himself to fully forgive him. Not that George would want that, but it's hard to say.

Dream stops in his tracks.

"I was thinking about, uh," Dream starts.

"Thinking about...?" George asks.

"Uh-- I was thinking about doing some training. By-myself. But... uh... if you want, you could come along?" Dream offers, turning around and giving George a nervous smile. "If there's anything you want to do, um... then we can just do that instead. If you want."

George hums.

"Uh, no, that's fine. We can-- I can watch you train. If-if you're not... too bothered... by that," George mumbles.

"Why would I be bothered? You're the king," Dream says, cocking his head to the side.

"That's just--" George looks like he wants to protest loudly, but he holds his tongue. "That's just it, isn't it? I-- your boundaries shouldn't be affected like that just cause I'm in a seat of power, Dream." George looks like he wants to say more, to go off into some kind of probable tangent about how *he never asked for this* and whatnot, but Dream raises a hand.

"Listen, Your Majesty," Dream says. "I'm not that dumb. If I didn't want you there, I would've said something. We're not kids-- we can talk it out."

George blinks at him.

"Uh, yeah. Sure, then," George stammers. "Alright. I--I'm sorry, I..."

"Look," Dream protests, a laugh leaving his lips. "Alright, listen-- it's nothing worth *apologizin'* to me over. You apologize to me once and it's like you're afraid I'm just gonna snap at you all the time or whatever. I've got tougher skin than *that*."

“*Hey, come on,*” George objects weakly. “It’s not like that.”

Dream wheezes a little, turning away.

“Alright, alright. Let’s head for the barracks.”

The barracks are on the first floor of the castle, positioned in a way that lets natural light filter through. Dream’s not exactly sure what the logic for this was-- maybe something about natural light being rejuvenating or whatever? ‘*Get you in the fightin’ mood*’ or something of the ilk? Who knows. Whatever the case, the barracks are cozy and a good spot for training that Dream’s used for ages.

“You can sit over there, I guess?” Dream says, pointing at a small wooden bench. “Sorry it’s not like-- anything super fancy, like a throne or whatever--” His tone is in jest, but it goes right over George’s head.

“No, it-- it’s fine,” George responds quickly, moving over to the bench.

*Well, now I just look like a dick,* Dream thinks to himself unhappily, watching as George gathers up his cape and sits down primly, his gaze downcast.

Dream thinks George focuses on the ground too much.

*If you focus there, how are you ever going to look forward?* Is what Dream would say if he was a bolder man.

But he’s not, so he keeps it to himself.

Dream sets up one of the wooden training dummies in the middle of the room. The dummy itself is battle-tested, etched with long scratches that are far too deep to mend. The surface of the wood is sun-bleached, well-worn with damage. After making sure the dummy isn’t wobbling too much, he moves towards the weapon storage, picking up one of the swords that have been set up in the corner of the room.

He positions himself low, bending his knees a little as he steps forward, slashing the dummy across the shoulder.



Dream feels George's eyes burning into him, watching his every move.

The training is silent, save for the *thunk* of metal against wood.

Dream lets his mind wander a little, down his hands to the tip of his blade. His eyes flutter shut.

And then--

*"That was the weakest hit I have ever seen," Techno says hotly. "Are you even tryin'?"*

*Knight training technically doesn't begin until you're twelve years old. That's probably because that's when you're finally at the age where you can swing a weapon with enough coordination to be able to improve and do better without hurting yourself.*

*But in the meantime, Dream, Techno, Wilbur, Punz, and Sapnap are milling around an old wooden dummy, trying to see who can knock it over.*

*Techno crosses his arms, his lower lip jutting out.*

*"I am!" Dream squeaks. "My arms hurt and I'd like to see you try and topple the-- the stupid dummy over with a hit."*

*"I bet I could," Techno huffs, snatching up a wooden sword from the pile. The wooden dummy looms overhead, ominous-- and Techno swings his sword down. It collides with the dummy, and the dummy collapses to the ground in a heap. "See! There, I did it-- you just weren't trying hard enough."*

*"Was too!" Dream protests.*

*"Yeah, Dream was tryin' his hardest," Sapnap pipes up. "You're just being mean to him, Techno."*

*"But Techno was able to do it in one hit," Wilbur chirps. "Is that not proof Techno's better?"*

*“I mean, maybe,” Punz adds.*

*Dream looks down at the pieces of the wooden dummy across the floor, striding over to kick one of the pieces across the room. It shatters into splinters.*

*“It doesn’t matter,” Dream says. “It’s just some stupid dummy, and in a real battle, it’s not gonna end up like this.”*

*“I think you’re just mad that I beat you,” Techno teases.*

*“No, I’m not --”*

*“Am I interrupting something here?”*

Dream snaps back to reality, turning his head to see Techno leaning against the doorframe to the barracks. The man’s brown eyes are sharp, focused on Dream’s stance.

“No,” Dream blurts out.

Techno turns his head to observe George.

George draws his shoulders defensively, almost trying to hide himself from Techno. Dream supposes he doesn’t blame the man-- after all, if Techno was staring at *him* like that, Dream would probably have passed out. That’s a bit of an exaggeration, but Technoblade wields fear like Fortuna wields her wheel: weaponized.

“How *is* Dream,” Techno says while staring at George. “Do you think?”

“Huh?” George stammers. “I, uh-- he’s... he’s pretty good, I guess-- at sword-wielding. His-his... he’s... he looks like he knows what he’s doing.”

“Hm.” Techno strides across the room to pick a crossbow off the weapons’ display. “Your Majesty, I will be very blunt-- aren’t you wasting time here?”

“I-- well--”

Techno raises his hand.

“If I wanted you to give me justification-- or excuses, I would’ve asked. I want an answer, Your Majesty-- yes or no. Are you wasting your time here?” Techno asks. His voice is calm and collected, yet sharp, like the whisper of a sickle right before it cuts through wheat.

“... Yes,” George answers.

Dream feels his heart drop into his boots.

Techno hums.

“Well, at least you’re honest. But frankly, Your Majesty, you don’t have time to be wasting. I’m sure nobody’s told you this-- to their detriment, I suppose-- that the kingdom is failing,” Techno says as he begins priming the crossbow. “People are starving. Crops are failing. Cattle are dying. The kingdom is one bad season away from a full-on famine. Were you aware of that, Your Majesty?”

Techno lifts up the crossbow, letting it glint in the light.

Dream knows that Techno’s no joke with the crossbow.

The hair on the back of his neck stands up on end, and Dream can’t help but watch George’s expression. His eyes are widened, his lips parting for short intakes of breath. His fingers clench against his outfit’s cape, his knuckles turning white.

“I-I am, now,” George murmurs. “But I don’t-- I would love to address things like this, but I have been given no op--”

“Ah-ah,” Techno stops him. “If I *wanted* to hear your justification or excuse for that, I would’ve *asked* for it. Don’t make me repeat myself. You’re the king. You don’t have *time* to be fooling around, you don’t have *time* to be watchin’ Dream stab that wooden dummy-- you should be acting for the sake of *our people* .”

George's lips part again, and he looks like he wants to say something, to protest--

Dream feels like he's been caught in a sea of static electricity-- ready to spark him at any time.

He's not sure what will send the shock rippling through him, though. It could be anything.

"I will," George says. "I-I'll try, I swear, just--"

Techno rolls his eyes.

"Your words don't mean anything, Your Majesty-- *actions* do. They speak louder than your words ever could," Techno says. "I recommend you take action quickly. Because I'm not gonna stand by and let the people of Fortuna suffer because of another *incompetent* king." Techno slips the crossbow into a case, throwing it across his back. "Now if you'll excuse me."

Techno storms towards the barracks' door, his hair swishing behind him.

His exit leaves the door softly slamming behind him, the previously carefully crafted comfortable mood of the room now a dramatic opposite. The air feels thick enough to cut through, with the tension rapidly increasing as George sat in the same spot, still processing the cutthroat words Techno had left him with.

The silence weighs heavy in the air, the cogs in George's mind clearly cranking on overdrive; Dream could feel his frustration rolling off of him like waves on a high tide. He opens and closes his mouth a few times to try and say something to George-- *anything* to ease the strain on his mind-- but he draws a blank.

*Well.* Dream thinks to himself. *Just gotta press forward, I guess.*

With that, Dream decides to stand back up and begin his solo training session again, rising and stretching his muscles out as he resumes position to practice his footing. His movements are more calculated than before, careful to not startle George out of whatever stupor he's currently stuck in.

This stupor, however, doesn't last much longer.

Dream glances over to the side as George stands and stretches his back. He fully turns his attention to George as a small noise falls from his lips from the relief of stretching out his sore body.

*His nose scrunches when he does that.* Dream observes to himself. *That's cute.* He blinks hard at his own consciousness. *What the fuck, no he's not-- he's the king; shut the fuck up, Dream--*

“What’s wrong?” Dream is shaken out of his own head by George’s voice; his eyes looking directly into Dream’s from across the room. “You seem out of it but, like, in a bad way.”

“Oh-- no I’m fine, Your Majesty. Just...” *Thinking about you.* “Thinking about different moves I wanna try out while I train.”

“Ah, makes sense,” George responds with a small, forced smile.

“Yeah, I wanna try out some new footings-- maybe get a new variety of moves to pull out ‘nd shake it up when I have duels, y’know?” Dream rambles about the training casually, doing his best to force down any extra stray thoughts that want to attempt and rear their ugly heads to the forefront of his mind. He fiddles with his sword as he speaks, desperate to look at anything but George. While he’s speaking, he can hear George hum in acknowledgement as he brings up various ideas he’s been stewing on-- but he’s interrupted by a loud rustling from George’s direction.

He cranes his neck back up from his weapon to follow the noise and is greeted by George unfastening the metal holding his cape sturdy around his shoulders-- tossing it to the side nonchalantly. Though nonchalant, the movement was far more elegant and smooth than Dream is willing to admit he took note of.

“Pass me a sword.” George shakes his head and gestures to the small pile of spare swords Dream has tossed off to his side with a furrowed brow.

Dream’s mouth hangs agape. “What?” He genuinely doesn’t believe what he just heard. He lets out a chuckle in disbelief. “*What did you say?*”

“I *said*, ” George puts a hand on his hip. “Pass me a sword; we’re going to spar.” He says it as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world-- as if it’s the *only* possible outcome to the situation they’re currently in.

“I- Geo--” Dream stops himself, quickly correcting his mistake. “ *Your Majesty*- - I can’t just- just *spar* with you. You’re the *king*, ” He tries to explain the logical reasons as to why he, a knight, can’t just procure a sword battle with the *king*.

George doesn’t accept that as an answer, though. “Dream, I didn’t *ask*. ” His voice suddenly turns slightly commanding. “Listen, don’t make me say this is an ‘order’--” He air-quotes. “--or whatever. I’m just pissed off and need to get this frustration out-- but if you’re gonna make me declare this an official order or something, I guess I will.”

Dream... well-- he supposes he can’t argue with that.

“Well-- I--” Dream scratches at his chin, doing his best to think of a way to worm himself out of this-- ultimately resulting in a sigh of defeat. He can’t think of anything else. “Fine, but just- just know I’m not going to hold back.”

George’s face splits into a wide grin, one that reaches the corners of his eyes.

“I think it’d piss me off more if you did.” He declares, waltzing towards Dream with easy strides as he’s tossed a polished training sword. The swords were definitely enough to cause damage-- just adding *that* much more intensity to their already tense session.

Dream readies his stance-- lowering his knees and casting his sword out casually to one side as he signals George to mirror him so they can begin the fight.

George casts out his sword, holding his position low. He looks stiff. Dream scans over him, trying to find a vulnerable spot to strike him at. He could probably kick at George’s shins and knock him to the ground immediately, but Dream doesn’t know whether he could commit to that. Dream strides forward, crossing the expanse before striking George square in the chest with the back of the sword.

George stumbles back, grinding his shoe against the ground.

Dream sees it clearly enough-- if he wanted to, he could’ve punished George for hesitating, could’ve swept George onto the ground if he wanted to-- but he doesn’t. He waits for George to right himself, waits for George to charge at Dream, sword raised.

The sound of metal on metal is piercing.

“You’re holding back, Dream,” George whispers, his voice hoarse. “I don’t take kindly to being treated like I’m going to break.”

Dream *scrapes* .

The sword flies upward, and Dream jumps back a little, keeping his sword pointed at George.

“I’m not,” Dream says.

“You are,” George retorts. “You could’ve-- you could’ve struck me down. Just now-- I *know* you could’ve.”

Dream swallows.

*Guilty as charged*, Dream thinks.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Dream admits solemnly as his sword meets George’s in midair. The clang of metal against metal is deafening, and George bears down on Dream with the sword. Dream’s grip shakes a little, and he looks to meet the king’s bright brown eyes, narrowed with intensity. His gaze *burns* .

“I’m not made of fucking *porcelain* , Dream,” George barks, a fury lacing his words that Dream wasn’t expecting to hear. “I’m not going to break. I want you to fight me head on-- like you mean it.”

Dream swallows.

His Adam’s apple bobs a little.

He feels-- like he’s dangling off a cliff, standing in a field right before he *knows* lightning is going to strike--

“I--”

“Don’t make me repeat myself, Dream,” George growls. “Don’t make me declare an *official order* -- don’t make me *order* you to fight me like you *mean it* .” His sentence transforms from a low growl to a snarl by the end.

The lightning falls.

It feels like inhaling and exhaling all at once, the air stolen from his lungs.

“Fine,” Dream grits out. “*Fine* .”

And then he strikes.

He slams his body right into George’s, caging him against the wall. George looks up at him, his gaze almost in a strange state of disbelief-- but Dream raises his sword, a subtle hint that if he was any other man, George’s neck would’ve been skewered-- and George lifts up his leg to push Dream back with a pointed heel. Dream laughs breathlessly, slammed back by the force-- he nearly slips--

He manages to catch himself with a hand, bringing himself back to his feet before he lunges at George again. George raises his blade, slamming it against Dream’s with a force that Dream would’ve never expected from him-- Dream presses his sword back with a harder intensity-- he feels George’s grip slackens a little, and the sword slips--

Dream reaches out for it.

It falls into his hand like Fortuna herself was smiling down at him, pulling the strings of the sword so it would nestle there.

“Lucky catch,” Dream gasps out as he catches George’s incredulous look. “That must have been a one in seven point five trillion catch.”

“Wh-- what are you *on* ,” George stammers out before he moves to strike Dream again. Dream laughs heartily, throwing his head back as George crosses the space between them, slamming his elbow right into the middle of Dream’s ribcage-- the laughter dies on his lips as pain blossoms under George’s touch, snatching the wind from his lungs once more.



“Where did you-- fuck, where did you learn how to do *that* ?” Dream asks incredulously, desperately trying to catch his breath. George shoots him a wicked grin.

“What,” George sneers, using Dream’s lack of defense to his advantage. “Did’ya think I wouldn’t know how to fight? You really thought it was smart to *underestimate me* , Dream?” His sentence is punctuated by a swift jab to Dream’s bicep-- directly on a sensitive pressure point that forces Dream’s fingers to relax. George’s sword falls from his grip and clatters to the ground.

George ducks out from standing in front of Dream, sliding out and grabbing the sword back off the floor while Dream continues to try and regather his bearings to react. His mind whirls frantically-- *what the hell just happened?*

Dream’s breaths are labored-- they burn with what feels like soot and ash, a flame fueled by the heat of the battle that he wasn’t expecting to be more than mediocre. He distantly registers the sound of George’s heels clicking against the tile.

“Wh-What the--” He coughs. “What the *hell*, George?” Dream is too dumbfounded to care about the slip up; that was an unimportant detail amongst the blazing threat George currently proposed.

“Got you~” George teases.

Dream laughs breathlessly, shaking his head.

“You’re *such* an idiot,” Dream says, his voice equal parts ragged from exhaustion and fond from amazement.

There’s a pregnant pause-- both parties using this point to recuperate themselves. Dream fully catches his breath and regains proper footing; George strips off his heels and rolls the tension out of his neck. George runs a hand through his hair, letting it fall down messily.

The moment passes and they start slowly circling each other, like sharks do before ambushing their prey.

“Alright,” George says, his voice thickened with exhaustion. His gaze still burns bright, a smirk on

his face. “We can do this the easy way or the painful way. What’ll it be, *Dream?*”

Dream feels like George has just put an iron-hot stake through his stomach. Heat coils somewhere deep within him, and Dream wills himself to maintain a straight face.

“The painful way sounds *good* right about now,” Dream gets out with a snarky grin.

“A man after my own heart, huh,” George teases before he charges at Dream, sweeping his sword. Dream raises his sword, meeting George’s with a loud *clang* .

“What’s up with the metaphors all of a sudden, George? *Getting cocky?*” Dream snickers as their swords break apart.

George opens his mouth to retort, but--

Suddenly, in a twist of fate that Dream can only describe as *horribly* unlucky, George’s foot catches against the edge of a tile and he immediately slips and crashes against the ground. Dream steps forward, pressing his blade against George’s throat.

“I win, Georgie~” Dream breathes out, beads of sweat rolling down his jaw.

George’s eyes are widened, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he looks up at Dream with a mixture of terror and shock.

If Dream was any other man, he could’ve killed George right here, right now.

“I’m not going to hurt you, George,” Dream says, his gaze softening.

“I-- *gods* , I *know* that, just,” George pouts. “I was *so* lucky, just then.”

Dream holds out his hand, extending it like a peace offering.

“Well, I mean-- that was pretty-- pretty impressive,” he says. “That you were able to hold your own like that-- for so long. I didn’t think you would. I-I underestimated you. I-- probably won’t make that mistake again.”

George laughs.

“Yeah, you really shouldn’t, *Dream*,” George says as he takes Dream’s hand, pulling himself up. Dream feels his heart skip a beat from the touch. “Thank you for sparring with me.”

“Not a problem, Your Majesty,” Dream responds. “If you want, uh-- you can head back inside to cool off-- I should probably clean up the mess we made... um... maybe we could head down to the dining hall and get some water or something. I dunno. Whatever you want.”

George smiles.

“I, uh, I honestly don’t... mind too much either way?” George shrugs. “But... water does sound nice. Later. I-- I’m going to go and... freshen up.” George picks up his cape from where he dropped it, snapping it around his shoulders before exiting the barracks.

Dream waits until he hears the door shut to drop his shoulders.

*What the fuck.*

*What the fuck was that!*

Dream paces around the room, his heart suddenly pounding loudly in his chest.

*Why did he--*

*He--*

Dream’s face flushes brightly, suddenly remembering--

*He fucking growled?*

*What the hell was that? I've never-- I've never seen anything like that.* Dream lifts up one of the swords, placing it back on the wall. *I've never seen him like that.* But to be quite fair, Dream hasn't seen much of George at all. He knows so little about the king, despite having spent the most time around him. George's walls tower high, rigid and unsurmountable.

Dream doesn't know if he could ever break them down.

Whether George would *want* him to break them down.

His fingers glow gold as he begins to mend the newer scratches on the wooden dummy, his fingers curling inwards as he runs his knuckles down its surface. The scratches begin to stitch back together, slow and deliberate, golden filament stretching across them: a permanent legacy left behind by him and him alone.

After the scratches heal up enough, Dream sets the wooden dummy back in its original place.

He gives the barracks a once-over before ruffling his hair back, a shaky exhale leaving his lips.

The door slams behind him.

George is standing close to the door, his gaze downcast once more. George's thumb is trapped between his index and middle finger, his index rubbing at his thumb in a soft, placating gesture. He looks up once Dream steps forward.

"Uh, I think... we could go to the dining hall now. And get that water. Does-- does that sound... good?" Dream asks.

George looks back down at his hand, his lower lip jutting forward.

"Yeah, sure," George says. "That-- sounds lovely."

Dream grins.

“Alright, then. Let’s go.”

Dream turns to head to the dining hall. He hopes that George is following him, but he can’t help but sneak a glance to make sure.

George trails behind him, keeping pace.

Dream turns back to face forward, a small smile quirking on his face despite himself. He doesn’t know why he was so worried that George couldn’t keep up-- of course he can.

“Hey,” George breaks the silence. “So... people keep comparing me to the old king.” He sounds strangely unsure of his words-- like he doesn’t quite know where he’s going with this.

“Yeah?” Dream eggs him on, curious to see why he vocalized the observation.

“Just... what was he like?” His tone isn’t particularly icy or jaded, yet Dream feels his blood run cold. His mind whirls a little, his fingers clenching.

“Well--” Dream becomes hesitant, both in his strides and his words. “He was...” He mulls over how to phrase his thoughts.

“He was...?” George repeats.

“Not a particularly good man,” Dream says. “He didn’t— he had a very... set image of what being king meant. It didn’t mean caring for anyone. It meant serving himself, I think. I’m not— I’m not too sure. He just... he was *selfish*. I know so many members of the council— Princess Niki, Bad—they tried to tell him to give a shit about more than his appetite. Than his self-serving pleasure. But he didn’t listen. He— he just... he was as on a high horse that no one thought he had *any* right to stand on.”

*“Now you listen to me, you pieces of shit— this place’ll be a whole lot different from here on out.”*

Dream presses a hand to the bridge of his nose, pinching it.

“The kingdom suffered. He knew. He *knew*— and he just— he didn’t *care*. He just thought we were wasting his time. I remember thinking, so often, *who put this guy in charge?* It’s like— he didn’t even want to be the king for a good reason. He just wanted it as a fancy title— but that couldn’t hide the rotten truth underneath.” Dream feels sick; it seems to happen every time he thinks of the old king.

“Well-- what did *you* think of him?” George asks. “Clearly he was... bad news.”

“... I’m glad he’s gone,” Dream murmurs. “He was a piece of shit. Fuckin’ deserved whatever came to him. Whether or not it was Quackity who stabbed him or if it was just that his heart got tired of pumping blood into the worst man alive-- Fortuna must have been smiling down for that one.” His tone is monotonous, laced with a strong animosity he’d been repressing for a long time. It feels like taking the fangs out of a venomous snake, *finally* removing the bitter taste in the back of his mouth.

“Ah,” George mutters. “So the comparisons are to a guy like that, huh?” He sounds distant-- like he’s miles away from where he stood. Dream wonders if George is thinking of his house, that small little cottage he’d first met him in. He wonders if George wishes he could run back home and escape-- escape behind something warm and familiar, something unwavering.

“Well... if it makes you feel any better, I don’t think you’re like him at all,” Dream says.

George makes a dissenting noise.

“... alright,” George says, sounding uneasy.

“I’m being honest, I promise,” Dream says. “You’re not like him at all.” He pauses. “Is this about what Techno said?”

“It— it’s n- fine. It-it kind of is,” George admits softly. “I just... he seemed so- so *adamant* . About... the comparison. I-I don’t— I know I haven’t... *done* anything. I know I h-haven’t really got much to complain about, really— and I probably just— look like I’m making a fool out of

myself, but... I dunno. It-It just feels unfair. All the time. Like the odds are just— stacked against me and I don't even have a good... playing field to fight back on."

Dream hums. "Yeah, that-- that's... pretty shitty." He sighs. "Look, let me level with you. I don't-- I *never* liked that guy; not now, not ever, I get sick thinking about how I had to serve under that douchebag. But-- but *you*, George-- you've given me a breath of fresh air, a semblance of hope that I'd completely given up on looking for. You're *different*, George— a *good* different. And-and sure. We've— we've argued and we're not even— we're not on the best terms. But... at least when I think about waking up and doing my work, it's not with a pit in my gut-- and that's gotta mean *something*."

George blinks.

His eyes almost look glassy.

"I..." George swallows. "I'm... thank you?"

"Look," Dream blurts out. "I've been— I was unfair to you. And your feelings about— all of this. I admit it, I just— I thought, you know, that like, you were just... you were like... being stubborn— and, and being difficult to screw with me. But, I think— if-if I were you, I wouldn't have reacted much better." He pauses.

*The crown is placed upon the king's head.*

*Dream feels like a briar vine is entangled around his feet, rooting him to the spot.*

*His fist clenches on the handle of his sword.*

"Well," the king snickers. "*That was easy.*"

*Dream wants to scream.*

*He fights the urge to swear loudly— fights the urge to swing or throw his sword across the room in objection. But he can't throw a fit, lest he embarrass his family. He's not a child anymore-- he's a*

*knight. Or, well, he will be.*

*Knights don't act out like that.*

*But...*

*This is wrong.*

*This goes against everything Fortuna stands for.*

*And yet—*

*And yet he has no good explanation for why.*

*Why is it wrong that this man is the king?*

*He's the proper heir to the throne. The papers that Dream can't even bother to read prove it. They'd been pored over, time and time again, and Dream knows it.*

*Everything is in place, as it should be, and yet—*

*And yet it feels so wrong.*

“Just... I think you're trying; trying more than he *ever* did. And— I should've been— I should've been more appreciative. Of that. Your Majesty.”

George laughs wryly, reaching up to brush something from the corner of his eye.

“Huh,” George says. “Well— thank you for that. I— that's like, the nicest tangent you've ever given me.”



“No-no problem. Your Majesty,” Dream says, rubbing his neck sheepishly. “Uh... anyways, we’re here. Should I just go and get some water and you can-- wait outside, or...?” Dream gestures to the doors into the dining hall.

“I--” George swallows. “I can... uh, I can... I can come with you. If that’s okay.”

“Sure!” Dream says, probably far too quickly. “That would be... that would be nice.”

Dream grasps the golden handle of the door, pushing into the dining hall. He waits for George to take a step through, crossing the boundary before he shuts the door behind him.

The dining hall is empty.

It’s been cleaned out, obviously-- the floors sparkle as if they’ve just been newly waxed, the chandeliers throughout the room bending and refracting rainbow-colored light across the floor. The room is quiet, peaceful. It’s almost nice. Dream picks up two of the crystalline goblets stacked carefully on a table, heading for one of the barrels used for water storage.

As he dips the goblets into the water, he catches George out of the corner of his eye.

George is staring up at the chandeliers again, his gaze seemingly awestruck.

“Do you like the chandeliers a lot, G-- Your Majesty?” Dream quickly catches himself again before he can get the name out-- they’re no longer in the barracks, which means that there’s always a chance someone could walk in on them.

“Uh... kind of? I dunno,” George says, tipping his gaze to look at Dream. “I-- they’re nice. I guess. The way the light kinda-- bends, is... it’s interesting. I guess. My mom used to-- she had like, a little glass marble she’d bend the light through. I liked it.”

“Oh,” Dream says. “That’s-- that’s nice. Your... your mom sounds nice.”

George laughs.

“She- she was,” George murmurs, his face somewhat downcast. “Nice, I mean.” He pauses. “Uh-- anyway, do- do you have the water?”

“Oh-- yeah. I do,” Dream says hurriedly, holding out the cup. “I’m-- I’m sorry. For bringing that up, if-if you weren’t--”

“It’s okay,” George says. “It’s-- it’s been a few years since...” George’s lip trembles a little. “It’s fine. Don’t worry about it, really.”

Dream doesn’t believe it, obviously.

But he’s not going to push George for an answer, especially when it looks like he’s not willing to give one.

George takes the cup from Dream’s hand, raising the glass to his lips.

They drink in silence.

“Do you want to sit down?” Dream asks.

George nods.

“Sure,” he says evenly.

They pick a small area next to the open window-- George sets his glass down on the table’s surface, pulling out his chair before sitting down. Dream pulls out his own chair, sitting down to watch outside the window. He sees two horses running in the fields-- no doubt Tubbo and Tommy racing each other yet again.

And as they drink in silence, Dream feels a small sense of pride.

It swirls in his chest, something slightly warm-- the knowledge that he was able to break through one of George’s meticulously crafted walls, a stubborn vine of ivy pushing its way through stone.

*If sparring with the king buys me some of his time, maybe I’ll have to do it more often.*

He sighs and takes another languid sip of water.

Dream feels like it's been a very, very long day.

## Chapter End Notes

so, fun fact: a large portion of this chapter wasn't written by me (kath, the person who writes all of these funky notes)

it was actually written by *stick*, the third coauthor of lucky charm who has been in the worknotes this entire time :grin:

We're going back to George's POV after this, so I hope you've enjoyed seeing a bit of the world from Dream's perspective-- this definitely won't be the last time we'll be seeing the world from Dream's perspective though :]

--

Do people even read these chapter notes? Maybe I should start putting blatant spoilers for the next chapters in here so people pay more attention to them

spoiler:

joke, that's a joke, i'd never put spoilers in the end notes :]

anyways, what I *can* do is talk about myself in these

I listen to Through the Deep, Dark Valley and Dear Wormwood by The Oh Hellos to write these chapters, as well as Notos and Eurus.

Give them a listen :] some of the songs in these albums are pretty plot-relevant!

---

Thank you for all the support on Lucky Charm; it's been absolutely phenomenal and I love reading y'all's comments and thoughts :]

# Chapter 11

## Chapter Summary

“It’s- it’s fine, Dream.” George says, a laugh leaving his lips. He pauses suddenly, an idea popping into his head. “Oh, hey-- you know what I actually did want to try?”

Dream perks up. “Oh? What’re you thinkin’?”

“Well, I don’t really know much about the castle except, wait... uh-- Tubbo said at the party that he’s always at the royal grounds-- maybe we could go check those out, y’know?” George offers with an unsure smile.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Something I want to do?” George asks, blinking at Dream.

“Yeah,” Dream says, pressing a hand to the back of his neck, looking a bit sheepish. “We’ve got, like, an entire day of downtime-- hell, even *Bad* said to take a day and do something fun, so why not?”

“Uh...” George rubs at his chin, furrowing his brow a little. “There’s nothing that I want to do, really.” He racks his brain, trying to scrounge up *anything* to do to pass the time, but ultimately draws a blank. “Yeah, I’ve got nothin’.”

“Hmmm,” Dream hums, his gaze contemplative. “We... could spar again? If- if you’re up for that; I’m always down to do some more training, haha.” His tone almost sounds... hopeful? The chuckle at the end was completely wracked with nerves, though.

“I’m uh--” George laughs. “I’m always down for more training too, just, still a little sore from when we did the last match a few days ago.” He absentmindedly runs a hand over his lower back, near where he grew a bruise from how forcefully he had been slammed to the ground.

“Oh, yeah--” Dream wheezes, folding in on himself. “Totally forgot about that, sorry, Your Majesty.” He continues laughing, but at the very least his tone seems *sort of* sympathetic.

“It’s- it’s fine, Dream.” George says, a laugh leaving his lips. He pauses suddenly, an idea popping into his head. “Oh, hey-- you know what I actually did want to try?”

Dream perks up. “Oh? What’re you thinkin’?”

“Well, I don’t really know much about the castle except, wait... uh-- Tubbo said at the party that he’s always at the royal grounds-- maybe we could go check those out, y’know?” George offers with an unsure smile.

“The party? Feels like ages ago,” Dream blows a low whistle and chuckles.

“It’s only been, like, a week,” George reminds. “But... yeah. I want to go and see the fields. Maybe I can wear my casual clothes--”

“Eret wouldn’t let you,” Dream says as he runs his hand through his hair. Stupidly, something in George thinks that he looks handsome. Like the epitome of a wooden carving of any prince or knight. “And any maid that saw you would probably scream.”

George sighs defeatedly.

“Yeah, I figured,” he murmurs. “I just-- I thought I’d dream of it for a second.”

“Dreaming about it is nice,” Dream says. “But we can’t live in dreams forever, Your Majesty. I think I saw Tommy and Tubbo earlier, actually— chances are we can catch them at the stables.”

“Alright,” George responds.

It’s not that he doesn’t like the hard work that went into tailoring him the outfit he’s wearing. It’s just that it’s-- so constricting. Everything’s far too skintight, far too body-conforming. Not that it’s a bad thing, not that he didn’t appreciate that kind of clothing-- just that he always believed it was better if someone else was wearing it. Preferably not him.

They head out into the royal grounds through a back door. Well, it’s not even a back door, really-- the doors are still beautifully carved-- just... smaller.

The wind blows into George’s face, and he squints against the draft.

If he'd experienced pain walking around at the party, there's nothing that compares to trying to walk in bumpy, uneven grass with thin heels.

Dream laughs at him as he stumbles forward and nearly collides with the green grass.

"If you've got enough time to laugh at me, then you've also got enough time to *pull me up* , Dream," George says with barely any venom in his voice. Dream chuckles a breathless wheeze, pulling George up, tucking a hand around his waist, and slinging George's arm over his shoulder. "Why does this feel so familiar, Dream?"

"Hm," Dream hums as they begin to walk across the grassy green fields. "It feels familiar to me, too." He gives George a cheeky smile, and George rolls his eyes.

The rest of the walk to the stables is spent in relative silence, save for George nearly stumbling once more and swearing loudly, followed by Dream's raucous, wheezing laughter-- and Dream humming. George swears he's heard the familiar tone Dream hums, but the question fades on his tongue before he can even ask .

The stables are far bigger than any other stables he's seen before. Far more horses and in far healthier condition. Towards the front are armored horses, their eyes and coats glistening. They snort a little as Dream and George walk past.

The two of them stop in their tracks.

Technoblade is stroking the hair of one of the horses with a small-toothed comb, murmuring to it in a soft and soothing voice. The severe expression on Techno's face that George had seen previously has melted into something more docile, almost more affectionate and vulnerable.

It's... particularly strange.

Dream stops supporting George long enough to wave politely.

"Techno!" Dream says, a note of apprehension entering his voice. "Fancy seeing you here."

Techno turns his head with a sudden alertness, the sharp edges returning to his vision.

“Dream,” Techno says. “You’re here with the king?”

George feels a wave of scrutiny wash over him as Techno watches him a strange sort of intensity. The hair on the back of his neck stands up, and George has half a mind to duck away from Techno’s gaze.

“His Majesty wanted to see the stables,” Dream explains. “We’re here to visit Prince Tubbo and Knight Tommy. Where are they?”

“...” Techno rubs at his chin. “Messin’ around with the princeling’s skeleton horse. Somewhere over-- over there.” Techno waves a nonchalant hand behind him. “I saw Tommy stick his hand in the horse’s ribs and... start moving his hand around, whatever that kid’s doing.”

“That... yeah, no, that sounds like Tommy,” Dream says with a polite laugh.

George looks away from their conversation to look at one of the horses. Its coat is a beautiful brown with a spot of white in the center of its head, and as George approaches, its eyes fixate on him-- he distantly realizes that this is the closest he’s ever been to horses this well trained, much less when in the business to actually ride one.

“Hey,” George says quietly as he leans on the stable door, putting his face closer to the horse’s. The horse snorts a little, flicking its eyes away from him. A smile quirks on George’s lips as he reaches out a tentative hand across the expanse, crooning his fingers gently as he watches the horse fixate its eyes upon him again, cocking its head as if curious. George places his hand on the horse’s hide, and the horse doesn’t startle.

George takes that as a cue to slowly run his hand up and down, a comforting and placating gesture.

The horse snorts again, its breath hot against George’s hand.

“I see Bullseye likes you.”

George startles, turning his head to see Dream with a soft smile on his face.

“Is that its name?” George asks, his voice somewhat awestruck.

“Yeah,” Dream responds. “He’s named for the white patch on his head. Do you wanna give him a sugar cube, Your Majesty?”

“Uh... sure, I guess,” George says tentatively. “What were you talking about with Techno aside from... whatever you were talking about.” As he speaks, Dream rummages through a box of supplies next to the stables, finding a sugar cube and placing it into George’s outstretched hand.

Dream shrugs nonchalantly.

“Just small talk,” Dream says. “Techno’s not particularly fond of it, so the small talk was maybe more of... a medium talk, but he said he’s fine with us taking some of the horses out for a ride. Tubbo and Tommy are probably going to do that.”

George holds out the sugar cube to Bullseye hesitantly, who takes it from George’s outstretched fingers deftly.

“Why do those two spend so much time on the royal grounds, anyways? Does Tubbo not have like — princely shit to do, or...?”

Dream shakes his head.

“He does, but it’s not, like, the biggest priority. I suppose that’s why Techno uses the word ‘princeling’ to describe him— he’s not really... how would you say, he’s not exactly... hm, bound to anything?” Dream scratches at his chin thoughtfully as a contemplative hum leaves his lips. “His duties are more of a formality than anything— he doesn’t have to show up to council meetings, doesn’t have to make speeches or appearances. Technically, he has *lessons*, I think? But he’s been in the palace his entire life. The etiquette and court lessons that will be so important for you are trivial for him.”

“Oh,” George says.

Somehow, George feels a furtive sense of jealousy.

A bitter, constricting vine, wrapping around his neck and choking the life out of him.



How nice it must be, to not have responsibility weighing you down.

“Anyways,” Dream says suddenly. “Let’s go to the far stables and see if what Techno was saying is true.” Dream doesn’t wait for an answer or acknowledgement, instead walking off deeper into the stables.

George nods, giving Bullseye a final stroke with the back of his knuckles before following Dream.

They hear Tubbo and Tommy before they see them.

*“Tommy, leave that poor horse alone! You’ve already wiggled your hand in its ribcage, and now in its socket? Surely not!”*

*“Fuck off, Tubbo, the horse can’t even feel pain. See, e’s all bones! ”*

*“Just because he’s all bones doesn’t mean you have the right to bully him!”*

*“I do what I want--”*

*“Tommy!”*

George raises an eyebrow at Dream, and Dream snickers a little, a laugh leaving his lips.

“They’re always like that, I think,” Dream says, and the sight they come across when they finally see the stables is-- both terribly confusing and horribly amusing. Tommy’s currently straddling one of the skeleton horses, his hand halfway through its eye socket as Tubbo covers his eyes, a low, exasperated moan leaving his lips. “Hello, you two!”

Tubbo uncovers his eyes by just a fraction.

“Hello, Dream! How nice to see you here! And-- oh, Fortuna-- you brought George as well! Hello, Your Majesty! It’s so nice to see you! What brings you to the stables?” Tubbo exclaims.

“Uh-- wanted to take you up on your offer of... horseback riding,” George explains. “Or at least learning how to, in my case.”

Tubbo’s eyes gleam as he presses his face closer to George’s, an excited smile crossing his face.

“Oh, I can do that for sure! It’ll be so much fun-- Dream knows how to horseback ride, too-- we can all do it together! Maybe we could ride out into the grounds and have a race or something-- that’s always so much fun. Horses really enjoy being able to let loose once in a while, too, I think!” Tubbo smiles brightly. “Hey, come out of there, Tommy-- *Tommy!* ”

Tommy is ineffectually attempting to pull his hand out of the skeleton horse’s eye socket, and he grunts a little in pain as his fingers catch.

“I can’t pull my fucking hand out, Tubbo,” Tommy says placidly.

“I can see that,” Tubbo says, his voice sounding somewhat disappointed. “Shouldn’t have been bullying that horse in the first place, huh?”

“Ugh, fine, you’re right,” Tommy bemoans. The skeleton horse tosses its head a little out of irritation, and Tommy slips, crashing onto the ground as his hand comes free. “Ow.”

“Karma!” Tubbo crows, pointing at Tommy as hysterical laughter leaves his lips. “You just got *owned* --”

“Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you,” Tommy repeats as he clutches his hand to his chest, rolling a bit in the dirt of the stables.

“Get up, Tommy,” Tubbo says, his tone sounding somewhat antsy. “We gotta show the king how to ride horses properly!”

“Alright...” Tommy groans tiredly, getting to his knees before standing up. “So like, Your Majesty-- do you know anything about horses? Anything at all?”

“Uh-- no, not really,” George says.

Tommy sighs dramatically, resting a hand on his hip. “This is really the king?” he asks, looking at Tubbo. A scandalized look crosses Tubbo’s face. “Okay, sorry, I just-- how do you not know how to ride horses? Or like, know *nothing* about horses, Your Majesty?”

“Because I lived on the outskirts of the kingdom and horses were expensive, Tommy,” George explains patiently. “This is the first time I’ve seen so many all at once.”

Tommy frowns.

“Well, now I feel like a dick’ead,” Tommy grumbles.

George hears Dream start wheezing loudly, and he turns to see him holding onto the stable as his shoulders shake. George snickers a little, stifling his own laugh behind his hand.

“What’s so funny?” Tommy says irritably, crossing his arms.

“Oh-- it-it’s nothing, it’s fine, Tommy,” Dream wheezes out. “Let’s-let’s just take a look at those horses, how about...”

“Yeah, sure, uh...” Tommy nods. “Do you wanna show George the ropes yourself, Dream?”

Dream nods, moving towards one of the stables containing a black horse, unlocking the stable to let it walk out. George watches in subdued awe as Dream runs a steady hand down the sleek black mane while whispering-- what he *assumes* is-- small praises to it as he fastens a bridle to the horse’s head. He leads the horse to the pile of saddling equipment on the opposite side of the stables and sets to work prepping everything.

He begins by quickly running a brush through the fine hairs on the horses back, making sure to apply a gentle force and remove all of the knots. George notes that Dream looks lost in concentration, but not in a way that signifies discomfort-- more like a calm familiarity from the repetitive process he’s most likely done a thousand times over.

Dream continues by picking up a basic, yet tastefully woven saddle blanket and draping it snugly against the horses back. Following this, he grabs one of the saddles with a huff and places it against the saddle blanket, being sure to adjust it to ensure it’s sitting properly before attaching the final

securing straps. The horse offers no protest, its face impassive.

Dream gives a confirming pat to the horse's mane and gestures for George to come towards him.

"Alright so," Dream grabs the reins and puts it in George's hand. "This is Weiss, one of the older horses in the stable. He's super well trained and probably the most gentle for beginners to learn on, so you're gonna learn with him."

"I-- Wow," George exclaims. "I mean just- *wow* , this horse is-- he's so... nice." He reaches a hand to rest it on the horse's muzzle. When the horse doesn't do more than close its eyes, his expression shifts from astonished to something far softer.

Dream laughs softly. "What's up? Never seen a horse this close before?" He jokes.

George shakes his head. "No I- I *have*, just-- never like this." He completely misses the joke, too lost in his amazement to identify it. "Solid colored horses are *far* more expensive than ones with splotches and- and in the village no one could afford one. I knew they were beautiful but... Fortuna, he's *gorgeous*. "

Weiss snorts a little, pressing his face against George's hand.

"He is," Dream says. "I'm gonna go saddle up one of the newer ones-- Tommy, where're the new horses? If I remember correctly, Puffy wants some of the newer ones to be trained a little, right?"

"Somewhere in the front," Tommy says, waving a hand dismissively. George watches as Tommy picks up a bridle, fastening it to the skeleton horse's head. "I'm gonna saddle up this guy."

"Tommy, you literally put your hand in its *eye socket* and now you're going t—" Tubbo protests.

"Tubbo, Tubbo, Big Man!" Tommy says magnanimously. "I'm sure the horse is fine. I've done this so many times before and he doesn't even complain. Look, he's definitely fine, see? Totally not mad-- not at all, Big Man!"

The skeleton horse doesn't look like it can emote. At all.

It doesn't even raise its head-- it simply looks on passively as Tommy begins the process of saddling it properly.

"That... doesn't even make it any better. J-just... whatever you say, then," Tubbo says. "If-if it bucks you off, don't come crying to me!" With that, Tubbo heads off for another one of the stables, picking a smaller brown horse to prepare.

George stares up at Weiss, his hand gently running down his muzzle. Weiss blinks a little, watching George with big eyes.

*Is it fun getting doted on? George wonders. Is it freer to be you?*

Weiss doesn't answer.

George-- isn't sure what he was expecting, honestly.

Maybe horses do have it easier after all.

"Oh, sweet Fortuna," George hears Dream swear distantly. "Okay, dude-- oh *come on* , you got saddled just fine, please don't make this difficult, we're almost done--" He turns to look at Dream, who's currently wrestling the horse to try and get the bridle fastened. The horse produces a loud string of protesting whinnies as Dream attempts to hold their head still and get the bit into their mouth-- to no avail though. *It's funny*, George thinks. *To watch him be so bad at something for once.*

George winces as a tumultuous shout rings throughout the stables, sourcing directly from Dream. "YOU FUCKER! DON'T TRY AND BITE ME-- " George stifles a giggle as he witnesses Dream leap backwards, wringing his hand. "Oh my *God!* When Puffy said you were temperamental *she wasn't exaggerating!* "

Dream sighs in frustration, running a hand down his face. He turns to George. "Hey, would you mind tossing me one of those apples--" George points to the barrel next to him, silently asking for confirmation. "Yeah, one of those. Thanks, Your Majesty." He tosses it over to Dream, who mutters a small thanks-- he sounds... defeated. George tries-- but fails-- to hold back another laugh at Dream's expense; he can't help but find his struggling amusing. Dream, his tough-as-nails knight being bested by a *horse*? It's surely a sight to be seen.

“Stop laughing at me, Your Majesty,” Dream sputters a little, a flush rising to his cheeks as he lets the horse take a bite of the apple. “It’s-- hey, Tommy, what’s this one’s name?”

“Spirit,” Tommy says as he hoists himself onto the skeleton horse. “Their name’s Spirit. I think Puffy called ‘em that cause *‘they’ve got a lot of fightin’ spirit!’* or whatever. I thought that was lame as shit, but it’s not like I had anythin’ better. Come on, Jorse.”

“That is the *worst* name for a horse,” Tubbo grumbles. “The worst.”

“I didn’t ask you, Tubbo,” Tommy says cheerfully as he leads... Jorse-- George mentally cringes at the name-- out of the stables. “Hey Dream, are you gonna help the king mount Weiss or what?”

“Huh?” Dream snaps his gaze from Spirit to look up at Tommy. “Uh... yeah, in a moment.” Spirit is still gnawing at the apple, and George watches as Dream’s gaze softens considerably, his hand reaching up to stroke Spirit’s head. “There you go.” His voice softens, murmuring words that are just out of George’s earshot.

George watches on, a soft smile coming to his face.

Dream’s in his element here.

It’s different.

A *good* kind of different.

It leaves something warm bubbling in George’s chest, the faint impression that Dream would be on a different trajectory if George had never stepped into his life--

“Alright,” Dream says. “I’ll help you mount your horse now, G-- Your Majesty.”

“Wait,” Tommy stops them. “I *really* don’t think that’s a good idea.”

Dream turns. “What-- wait, why?”

“Look at his *feet!*” Tommy protests, gesturing to George’s heels. George feels heat rising in his cheeks at Tommy’s exclamation, and he turns his head away to avoid Tommy’s scandalized look. “He can’t be on a horse in *those things*. God, it’s like Eret has no idea how to make outfits that are actually *practical*, innit? We’ve got... there’s probably a few spare boots or whatever in the shack over there? He needs to get a pair of those, or so Fortuna *help* me, but he’s not getting on that horse before he gets a proper set of shoes. Seriously, Dream.”

“Oh. Shit... you’re-- you’re totally right, Tommy,” George can see Dream’s expression quickly shift from heavy-set confusion to embarrassment, his cheeks dusting a light pink from what George *assumes* is shame. “Hold on, Your Majesty, I’ll--” He swallows heavy. “I’ll go grab those, stay... here. I guess.” The silent ‘please’ dies on his lips-- George still catches it, though.

“I’m not going anywhere,” George assures.

Dream gives George a strained smile.

“Yeah, but... just makin’ sure,” Dream says, before he turns to head to the stables.

“I reckon he’s in love with you or some shit,” Tommy mutters under his breath, still loud enough for everyone to hear.

“*Tommy!*” Tubbo exclaims.

“What?” Tommy responds, raising a brow. “I’m *right*. They hated Fortuna because she spoke the tru--”

“That is *not* how that myth goes,” Tubbo grumbles, shaking his head. “Either way, you can’t just be speculating on the king’s relationships with his confidants-- or maybe... just the one confidant. I — Do you mind, Your Majesty?”

“I-- yeah? I guess I... kinda do,” George says falteringly. “And no, Dream’s not in love with me. That’s really-- why would you *say* something like that, Tommy?”

“Because it’s true? And I am *never* wrong,” Tommy says, huffing a little. “All I speak are hard *bangers*.” The skeleton horse Tommy’s mounted on paws at the ground a little, and Tommy shifts slightly on its back. “And I think Dream is in love with you. Like a truly miserable little man, honestly.”

George feels a horrible heat swelter behind his face.

“Come on, now, it rea--” George begins to protest.

A loud slam permeates the air, interrupting him.

“Your Majesty, I *think* these are your size?” Dream calls. George snaps his gaze to Dream, who’s currently holding a pair of well-worn riding boots in his hands. “Wait-- why are you so red? Are you like, feverish?”

“No! No,” George blurts out immediately, raising his arm to hide his face. “I’m doing fine.”

George hears Tommy snicker, quickly followed by a loud ‘OW’ as Tubbo smacks his arm.

Dream cocks his head at Tommy and Tubbo’s interaction, though he shakes his head and holds out the boots to George, clearly more focused on the task at hand than whatever mischief those two are making.

“Here,” Dream says. “Do you-- do you need my help putting these on--”

“No. Oh my gods, no,” George snorts, reaching out across the expanse to grab the boots. “I really-- yeah, do *not* help me put these on. I’m good. Thank you, Dream.”

“... You’re welcome,” Dream says softly, a small smile quirking on his face.

There’s a slight pause.

“Uh, can I just-- pick a stool to... sit at and put these on?” George asks hesitantly.

“Duh?” Tommy quips. “I mean, you’re the king, aren’tcha? You don’t have’t ask permission for stupid shit like that. Hell, I mean, you could probably just *take* a chair and nobody could say anythin’ about it.”

“I-- I... that just... sounds rude on principle, really,” George says.



“That’s just the way it works, right?” Tommy shrugs. “Bein’ king... means you can just kinda ignore all that. I dunno.”

“I don’t think so,” Tubbo says kindly. “His Majesty being so-- how do I put it? Timid, maybe? It’s a very nice change. Shows that he cares!” He grins brightly, and George shakes his head a little as he heads over to a smaller stool, sitting down to unzip the heels and switch them out for the riding boots. The laces are so much stiffer than the work boots he used to wear-- and yet they feel about the same. The leather is soft to the touch, and the shoes are about the perfect size. They don’t pinch or feel too big-- they’re just... really nice-- comforting, almost.

George spends more time fiddling with the laces than he thinks he does. He almost loses himself to the sensation of the braided cords on his fingertips, rough and worn.

“Do you-- do you need help there, Your Majesty?”

George looks up to see Dream looking down at him intently, his gaze warm and patient.

“I-- no,” George says quietly. “Just that... these kind of remind me of home.”

*Home .*

His heart squeezes with such a powerful force of longing. Of such powerful and poignant *homesickness* that it almost takes the breath out of his lungs. How he misses it. How he misses--

“Oh,” Dream says softly. “Well-- take your time with it, then, Your Majesty. We’re in no rush.”

George nods, tying up the final laces before standing up. A wave of relief washes over him as he stands, his weight evenly distributed across the worn riding boots. For the first time in a while, he feels like *himself*, more *real* and less like a husk or empty carapace.

It’s nice.

“Alright, Your Majesty-- stand here, close to Weiss’s head for me?” Dream gestures over casually. George nods, walking over. His step feels so much lighter-- the steps coming more naturally to him

than they ever have within the palace. “It’s simple, really, you’re just gonna just mount the stirrup and then swing your other leg over-- you can grab onto the saddlehorn here--” He pats the saddle a little to prove his point, “to steady yourself if you want, but if you need me to give you a helping hand, I can do that.”

He pauses to let the words sink in.

“Does-- does that make sense?”

“Uh,” George clears his throat. “Y-yeah. Yeah, I think I get what you mean.” His tone gives away that he *barely* got a grasp on what Dream meant-- but he assumes he’ll figure it out. “I mean, it can’t be too hard, right? It’s just... sitting on a horse.”

Dream lets out a high-pitched wheeze. “Well, I mean *technically* , yeah-- you’re right. It *is* just sitting on a horse, I guess, with just a little more flair.”

George snorts a little.

Dream tries to maintain a straight face, but his nose scrunches a little as a wheezing laugh leaves his lips. He leans forward, a desperate gasp escaping him. Upon seeing Dream starting to laugh, George starts to chuckle as well, covering his mouth to obscure his smile.

For a moment, it’s just them.

All too quickly, the moment draws to close, and the laughter starts to die down. George watches as Dream takes an even breath, sobering up a little.

“Alright, alright,” Dream starts. “We need to actually get you on the horse, Your Majesty.” He places a feather-light touch to the small of George’s back: giving him enough room to mount the horse on his own, but a gentle reminder to George that if anything were to happen, Dream was there. “Go ahead and put your foot in the left stirrup, ‘n then try and hoist yourself up and over, okay? Land your other foot in the right stirrup and you’ll be as good as gold.” Dream shoots George a reassuring smile as he loops the reins around the saddlehorn.

George nods, turning to face Weiss. He does as Dream said, looping his left foot into the stirrup and grabbing the saddlehorn for leverage, swiftly putting all of his weight down on the stirrup to

hoist himself up. In a quick movement, he swings his right leg over the opposite side of the horse and secures his foot into the opposite stirrup, his grip white-knuckled around the saddlehorn.

“Ey! You did it!” Dream cheers from the ground, giving a light clap to boot. He hesitates for a second, then pets Weiss’ mane. “Calm down though, Your Majesty. You’ve gotta loosen up-- I know you’re nervous but, like, chill out before the horse panics with you. They sense fear, y’know.”

George releases a shaky exhale. “Yeah, yeah. I know, just... wow I didn’t expect to land that right away. Figured he would’ve moved at the last minute or tried to... ‘iunno, shake me off or something.” He hears Dream chuckle.

“Okay yeah, I’ll give that to you, too-- you did get pretty lucky with that. Weiss is well-trained and pretty calm but never *this* docile.” Dream taps his chin, a soft hum leaving his lips. “You might be a horse whisperer, honestly.”

George laughs.

“No, no way,” George forces through his giggles. “Absolutely not-- go get on Spirit, you jackass.” He rolls his eyes as Dream throws his head back and laughs again, walking towards Spirit and prepping to mount the horse.

Now that he’s actually properly situated on Weiss, the nerves are a bit harder to ignore. His fingers tingle a little as he holds onto the reins, and occasionally Weiss shifts, jostling George’s position ever so slightly. George takes a shaky inhale, trying to calm his tingling nerves.

“Dream, what are you *doing* --”

George turns his head to see Tommy guffawing a little as Dream, with what looks to be *incredible difficulty*, mounts Spirit. Spirit whinnies a little, stamping their hooves against the ground.

“I-- Spirit’s not like, *angry* or anything, right? Like--” Dream says worriedly, situating himself squarely on Spirit’s back. “Like, I swear, I was trying to watch out for the warning signs and stuff-- but I-- *shit!*” Spirit suddenly whinnies again, jolting a little. George watches as Dream nearly slips off their back, a punched-out gasp leaving his lips.

“I reckon they just don’t like you, Dream,” Tommy snickers. “Since they keep trying to spite you.”

“Dream!” George calls worriedly.

“I’m good, I’m fine--” Dream manages to right himself back up, adjusting his grip.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” George asks, cocking his head. “I-I dunno too much about horses, right, but Spirit seems... really temperamental. You might get hurt.”

“It-- it should be fine,” Dream murmurs, leaning forward to stroke Spirit’s head. “I’m a good horse rider.” George isn’t sure why, but that sounds more like a promise Dream was making to himself rather than to him.

“It’s true, he’s really good.” Tubbo chimes in. Dream gives Tubbo an appreciative smile, which morphs into a cocky smirk. “Anyways, do we wanna get going? I think we can do a simple trail and come back.”

“Sounds good,” George responds.

Tubbo grins.

“Alright, then. Come on!” Tubbo says cheerfully. “Come on, Bee, let’s get going.” He starts walking his horse down the trail, hopping on her back in another quick and calculated movement. Tommy, George, and Dream all follow suit, all walking on their horses down the well-beaten dirt path that leads into a large green field.

Everything goes fairly smooth-- Tommy and Tubbo speeding up every now and again to have miniature races in between cracking jokes and normal conversation, Dream and George faltering slightly behind the younger two to share whatever small words that cross their minds. Compared to the loud, boisterous atmosphere Tubbo and Tommy have going, Dream and George’s is something much quieter-- something more intimate; they’re enjoying each other’s company just watching the landscape pass by slowly.

Now and again, George hears Dream swear under his breath as he jerks the reins in his hands to keep Spirit on track. “Havin’ trouble there, Dream?” George teases.

“No, no-- I swear, they’re just... being annoying right now,” Dream says, wrestling against Spirit, who’s letting out loud whinnies as he slows down his movement to stamp the ground with his hoof

in agitation.

George slows down Weiss's movement to keep pace with Dream and Spirit. "Are- are you *sure*? " He sputters, noticing that Dream seems to be losing control of the horse. "It- It doesn't look like you've got a very good--"

Dream interrupts him with a slightly irritated shout. "I-I've *got this*-- " However, likely sensing his frustration, Spirit's ears flatten against their head. Their tail lashes once, maybe as a warning-- and then-- " *OH SHIT!* "

And then there's a loud thud.

It almost happens in slow motion.

Dream completely loses his balance, falling right off Spirit's side and hitting the ground. A pained groan leaves Dream's lips as his arms reach up to cover his face. George's heart pounds in his ears, and he jerks the reins to stop Weiss's movement.

" *Ho-ly* shit," George hears Tommy say as he turns around. "Ey, Dream! Did you fall, big man? Oh fuck--"

Spirit suddenly rears back a little, whinnying loudly.

If a horse could have a shit-eating grin on its face, George thinks Spirit probably has one of those on their face right now.

Tommy immediately jumps off his horse to pull Spirit towards him, calming whispers leaving his lips as he tries in vain to calm the horse down. George slips his legs out of the stirrups, hopping off Weiss to approach Dream.

Dream hasn't moved from his spot, his arms still firmly fixed over his face.

" *Are you sure this is a good idea* ," George says mockingly. " *Yes, Your Majesty-- I am so sure I am such a good horse rider* --"

“... ‘s just the one,” Dream says petulantly. “Just the *one* horse. I’m way-- way better at this, usually.”

George snorts.

“Please,” Dream groans desperately, uncovering his face for just a moment to show his mortified expression. “Don’t make f--”

“You look *so* stupid right now,” George breathes out as his body wracks with laughter. His shoulders tremble with the weight of his laugh, and he bends forward to hug his sides as he cackles. “I was *so* worried, jeez--” Now that he’s on the ground, the adrenaline rush catches up to him. He almost feels euphoric, giddy with relief and terror and *excitement* -- it’s almost on the side of too much. “Your face, Dream, oh my *god*--!”

George continues to laugh, his laughter dangling on just the side of howling-- and his stomach begins to throb with the exertion. He nearly falls to his knees, completely consumed by the absurdity of it all.

But his laughter’s not enough to distract him from Dream’s expression.

Dream looks at him, looks *through* him-- his gaze suddenly so enchanted by George. As if George has just dangled the brightest light in front of him, so bright he can’t look away.

It’s a strange thing.

And yet, as Dream starts to chuckle as well, George finds it slips his mind entirely.

## Chapter End Notes

#dreamfell what a fucking loser LMAO imagine falling off your horse what a GAY  
LOSER /j /j  
i fucking hate horses by the way, me and stick struggled so hard to write this

—

songs I listened to while penning this chapter!  
- like the dawn  
- eurus  
- good riddance (hades is such a good game ngl)  
- 29 (run river north)

- helltaker OST
- pigstep

thank you for all your support on lucky charm, we're hoping to speedrun chapters 12 + 13 so get ready for so many updates. like, all at once.

## Chapter 12

### Chapter Summary

“What’s on the agenda today, by the way?” George asks, turning to face Dream.

Dream hums, tucking his hands into his pockets.

“Bad wants to see us,” Dream says. “Says it’s important.”

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

In what seems to be no time at all, the palace starts to change.

The sunlight wanes a little, replaced by days of hazy overcast. Sometimes, when they head out into the fields, George will sometimes feel a bit of a drizzle. Nothing too big, but enough to be present-- as if the sky itself is pressing down to trap him, to remind him that he’s been in the palace for far longer than he wants to.

*How has it almost been a month already?* George wonders as he watches outside.

It’s another overcast day.

The air is becoming colder, the trees are starting to bleed in shades of yellow and brown.

The castle has a subtle chill-- the stones almost emanate an aura of wet cold as he walks past them with Dream. Occasionally, the wind will brush past George’s ear, sending little chills down his spine and his fingertips.

He doesn’t hear much of the songbirds anymore.

“I really hate this kind of weather,” Dream says casually, holding his arms by his head. “I mean, really-- if it’s gonna be rainy, it should just be rainy. If it’s gonna be sunny, it should just *be* sunny. Overcast weather is just the coward’s way out. It’s not anything. It just-- *is* . Plus it’s humid. The palace always gets so stuffy when it’s humid.”



“Yeah, yeah,” George responds, rolling his eyes. “You’ve said that about the weather for the past few *days* it’s been cloudy. I think that chip on your shoulder needs to die down.”

“No,” Dream responds, puffing out his cheeks. “Never.” He pauses. “I mean, like, I just... don’t like it. It feels like the weather’s holding its breath. And that makes me nervous.”

“Well...” George shrugs. “That just sounds like a you problem, Dream.”

“It--” Dream pauses. “No, you’re-- you’re quite right, honestly. It... whatever.” He kicks at the ground, a somewhat frustrated expression on his face. George can’t help but think he’s seen more and more of Dream in the past few weeks. Dream’s different faces and expressions, each equally distinct from the last, show sides to him that George would have never seen otherwise.

And yet, the castle still has its moments where it presses in on him.

They come like the ocean waves-- sometimes there are days where he thinks he’s finally getting used to the castle, or maybe the castle’s getting used to him-- and then there are days where all he wants to do is run away, away from the walls and ceilings that press in on him, a fancy marble casket that threatens to pull him underneath six feet of churning, twisting earth.

“What’s on the agenda today, by the way?” George asks, turning to face Dream.

Dream hums, tucking his hands into his pockets.

“Bad wants to see us,” Dream says. “Says it’s important.”

George scoffs.

“The last time he said it was important, I had to weigh in on a discussion about whether curtains should be added to the bedroom,” George says. “And then in the end, they didn’t even listen to me at all.”

“Gotta admit, that one was really dumb,” Dream snickers. “But, no, this one might be kind of important. Princess Niki and Prince Tubbo are coming along.”

“Oh?” George says, raising an eyebrow. “Really? That’s... that’s different.”

It sends nervous butterflies coursing through his bloodstream. His mind goes a little hazy as he tries not to think of the horrible possibilities, the connotations of the event. He grips the edge of his cape, trying not to let his grip grow too strong, lest Dream notice.

“Yeah, it is,” Dream says, continuing to look ahead. “But I think it’s going to be fine, really.” He pauses. “Do you trust me?”

“...” George shrugs. “I guess,” he says evenly. “After all, there’s no one besides you who’s so close.”

Dream’s resulting smile is a small one, but he reaches out to pat George’s shoulder. His hand feels warm, rough. It’s... nice. It’s... very much Dream. George allows himself just this one thing— to think that it *is* nice to be reassured.

“I’m glad,” Dream says. “I mean, you’ve come a pretty long way from where you were when you first came to the palace.”

“Mm... I guess you could say that,” George murmurs. He’s still not quite sure what to think about it. He’s gotten more accustomed to the palace, yes, but at what cost? He’s gotten used to the softness of the bed, the general richness of the food, the *luxuriousness* of it all— but begrudgingly. It doesn’t change the impression that he’s not anywhere near ready for this, that he’s some kind of hollow shell for others to put their assumptions and ideas into.

And yet his mind continually wanders back to his house-- is there more dust now? Does it gather on the table, on the bookshelves? Are the bedsheets fraying away? Have caterpillars eaten through the delicate lace of his curtains? Have the chickens in the back of his house chosen to leave, to feed on greener pastures?

“He says we’re to meet up in the royal archives this time around,” Dream says, interrupting George’s thoughts. They head for a hallway that splits off into a larger atrium, and a few servants bustle by, carrying racks and towels. “Have you been there, Your Majesty?”

“Uh... no,” George says falteringly. “But it’s that, like... domed structure towards the back of the palace, right?”

“Yep,” Dream says. “How have you never been in it?”

“Uh... because you all said I had better things to do,” George snickers, though his voice has a bit of an edge to it. “But I suppose we can go take a look at it now.”

“Yeah, of course,” Dream says. “Come on, Your Majesty. Follow me.”

They head through the palace, down a path that becomes unfamiliar far too quickly. It looks the same as most of the other hallways-- decorated with fancy sconces, the ceilings high and vaulted and lined with running moulds. The one of the walls is decorated with paintings depicting life around Fortuna-- from grand balls to the plight of farmers working in mud. George almost finds it ironic-- after all, now that he's spent close to a month in the palace, he feels like he can say that hardly any of the royal dignitaries *truly* care about the people depicted in these paintings.

The other wall bears portraits of royal family members and their families.

George looks up to see portraits of Tubbo and Niki, both looking straight forward as their parents surround them. It's... strange. The portraits are evenly spaced, each one leading seamlessly into the other-- and yet--

“There's a gap,” George says suddenly.

“Huh?” Dream asks, turning his head. “Did you say something, Your Majesty?”

“I-- there's...” George gestures to the space between Tubbo and Niki's portraits. “It's... a slightly bigger gap right here.”

Dream pauses in his tracks, turning to observe the portraits.

He hums.

“Yeah, you're... you're right, there *is* a gap,” Dream says, his voice taking on a bit of a curious note. “I... it's a bit bigger than the other ones. I think it's always been there? I mean, when I was heading to the royal archives before... I never noticed it. Might've been a fluke when they were being hung up. I dunno.” Dream steps back, his gaze suddenly more perturbed. “I... now that you've mentioned it, I can't stop seeing it. That's...”

Dream shrugs, running a hand through his hair.

“Odd?” George supplies.

“Yeah,” Dream says, giving George a somewhat sheepish smile. “ *Odd.* ”

They continue through the hallways, George keeping pace with Dream. Sometimes Dream’s strides are bigger, and George finds himself instinctively trying to stretch to keep pace. Dream faces forward, continuing to walk before they stop in front of a set of dark oak doors, embossed with the symbol of an eye and a quill. The Royal Archives.

Dream pushes open the doors, and George steps through, across the boundary.

The Royal Archives are... much different than what George expects.

Bookshelves extend into the room, stacked high with records, manuscripts, and aged tomes. Some of the walls are decorated with framed sketches of Fortuna, and a large, aged canvas painting of what appears to be the first king of Fortuna is mounted on one of the walls. Floating lanterns dance about the room, giving the entire Archive a golden glow. As George stands, trying to take it all in, a paper crane flutters past his head and flies deeper into the Archives.

“Bad is somewhere deeper in,” Dream says. “Come on.”

Dream ushers George forward, slipping through cramped bookshelves and stacks of haphazardly placed parchment into the heart of the Archives.

The sea of books and paper splits for a large, circular table. The table is both carefully engraved and yet well-worn, parts of the delicate leaves and roses already having been worn smooth by generations of archivists and archival assistants, no doubt. The surface of the table has an engraving of the kingdom-- perhaps to serve as a map? George isn’t very sure. And yet he loses himself to the detail, and he reaches out to run his hand across its surface, his eyes resting on one small town on the edge of Fortuna’s borders--

*Somnium.*

*Home.*

“Welcome, Your Majesty!” A voice shocks George out of his stupor, and he snaps his head up to see Bad, surrounded by fluttering paper of both crane and plane variety, sitting at the table along with a tall stack of papers. “I see you’re... quite entranced with the table?”

“Huh? Yes,” George says quickly. “It’s-- it’s nice.”

Bad gives George a smile.

“It is, isn’t it? Whoever carved this was very talented. But that was probably generations upon generations ago,” Bad says as he takes a paper off a stack situated next to him. “Generations upon generations of preserved knowledge and ethics, ideals forever unchanging. Maybe that makes it boring to categorize, but it’s nice seeing the trends over time.” He peers at the paper, pushing his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “Oh, I’m sorry, Your Majesty-- my mind wanders a lot within the Archives.”

He sets down the papers, straightening them out before standing up.

“We’ll wait for Prince Tubbo and Princess Niki,” he explains. “I’ll be briefing you on what’s happening tomorrow.”

“What’s happening tomorrow?”

A soft voice rings out through the Archives, and George turns to see Niki walking briskly in, Wilbur at her heels. She’s dressed in dark blue, the gold embroidery of her dress shining in the warm light.

“Oh, Princess Niki, impeccable timing as always,” Bad says. “Have a seat-- now we’re just waiting on Prince Tubbo... I have a feeling he’s going to be late.”

“I reminded Tommy not to head to the stables,” Wilbur says quietly. “But chances are high he probably forgot. He’s like that.”

Niki laughs brightly.

“Yes, that *is* Tommy, isn’t it? He and Tubbo really do work quite well together,” she says fondly. “But... it’s very nice to see you, George.” Niki turns her head to address George, a smile on her face. “How have you been? I’m sorry we haven’t spoken very often-- I’ve had my own errands to run, training to do.”

“I’ve... been alright,” George murmurs. “Managing, as it were.”

Niki giggles again.

George isn’t sure whether she’s laughing at him because she finds him funny or if she’s just trying to fill the silence with something.

“Managing is well and good,” Niki says pleasantly. “Sometimes it’s the best we can do.” She pauses. “You know, I remember distinctly a month ago, I told you that you could send a letter through Ranboo if you wished to speak to me-- did that slip your mind?”

George blinks.

“Uh, you know, m--” he goes to answer only to hear a loud slam and the repeated *pitter-patter*, *pitter-patter* of footsteps.

“Are we late? Please don’t tell me we’re *late* --!” Tubbo’s voice sounds breathless as he stumbles through the Archives, squeezing his side.

“There’s no way,” George hears Tommy say confidently. “No way we’re late--”

“Actually,” Wilbur says loudly, snapping open a pocket-watch. “You *are* late, Tommy. By about five-ish minutes.”

As Tommy and Tubbo step into view, Tommy’s face comically drops a little as he hears Wilbur’s voice.

“Fuck,” Tommy says smartly. “Well, s--”

“Language!” Bad says, snapping his fingers at Tommy. “Don’t make me remind you more than once this time, *please* .”

Tommy snickers a little, raising his hands.

“Hey, Big Man— I won’t guarantee it. Don’t hold your breath,” he says casually.

“Tommy, seriously,” Tubbo says, a note of exasperation creeping into his voice. “I don’t want to cause trouble— plus, after we’re done here, we’ll be done. Alright, Tommy? *Tommy* .”

George watches as Tommy attempts to take one of the paper planes floating in the air and unfold it. He stops at Tubbo’s words, like a dog having been scolded for doing someone it wasn’t supposed to.

“Sorry,” Tommy says, not sounding particularly sorry at all.

Bad takes a deep breath.

“Well! With *that* out of the way...” Bad says, a strained smile forming on his face, “let’s talk about what I’ve summoned you here for.” Bad unfurls one of the sheets of paper, observing it carefully. “This is a serious meeting with some of the royal dignitaries in Fortuna. Ranboo and I have taken the liberty of contacting them about... the situation with His Majesty.”

George feels Tubbo and Niki’s eyes shift to him.

“This will be the first time they see you,” Bad intones. “So it’ll be important to make a good first impression. This is your chance to show members of the royal court what you’re like-- what *policies* you wish to pursue when ruling Fortuna.”

Bad’s hand sweeps over the map, pressing his hand down over a certain region. The map glows golden, and Bad snaps his fingers as he pulls his hand up. The shuddery image of a small farming town comes into view.

Niki gasps.

The townspeople look... *hungry* . It's a look that George has seen all too many times, etched on the faces of children and desperate parents. The cattle look frail. The crops are blackened, withering in the hands of anguished farmers.

"This is the current state of one of Fortuna's many towns," Bad says softly. "Due to unprecedented drought, crops failed during the summer-- and those that did survive were... much smaller than anticipated. Sickly. Livestock have been failing as well, succumbing to a disease that... I could only describe it as *rot* . I won't stress the details, but the cattle that managed to survive in this snapshot... are, of course, very lucky."

George swallows.

*Somnium...*

When he'd left it, he'd still been doing well--

But he wasn't deaf to the soft whispers of something darker looming over the horizon back then.

*What is it like now?*

The question rises on his lips, but he tries to force it down.

This isn't about him-- about his selfish wishes anymore.

"How horrible," Niki whispers. "We ought to have done something about this sooner, but back then--"

Tubbo swallows.

"Niki, we couldn't have done anything about it back then," Tubbo murmurs. "Not when he was still in power. He wouldn't have let us. Don't blame yourself too much for it."

Niki sighs, slumping her shoulders. She watches the map with despairing eyes, her fist clenching on the table.



“Well-- at least we can start doing something about it now,” Niki says resolutely. “*We must* .”

“That’s the issue,” Bad says. “The royal dignitaries--”

Niki slams her fist against the table. The impact rings through the archives. George glances at Niki’s face, only to find her gaze dark and her shoulders trembling with barely-concealed frustration and rage. Wilbur sets his hand on Niki’s shoulder, and she takes a deep breath.

“Sorry,” Niki says softly. “Continue.”

“We’ll have to convince them,” Bad continues, his voice somewhat shaky. “That we’re making the right decision. His Majesty will have to do the brunt of the work here-- since they already see you as... illegitimate, Princess. And the Prince is-- well, surely you understand that they see him as too young.”

Tubbo sighs, drumming his fingers against the table.

“I know,” Tubbo murmurs. “But it’s important for both me and Niki to show up?”

“Yes,” Bad says. “To show full support for His Majesty, as it were. A penny for your thoughts on this, by the way?” Bad turns to address George. George’s mind spins a little. It hurts to think about it-- the idea that he--

“I--” George starts. “I... suppose I can try.”

*Suppose I can try?*

He slaps himself mentally for it--

He’s not even ready for something like this.

Even after so long-- he doesn't want to be called *king* . Doesn't want to be around people who would attempt to affirm that--

“That’s the spirit!” Bad says, clasping his hands together. He smiles a little, though the smile dies down a little as he sets his palms on the table, pressing closer to the three pairs in the room. “Listen I-- I know this is a frustrating situation, and I understand how you may get upset during the meeting tomorrow; however, please, *please*, be on your best behavior.” He pauses, taking a deep inhale, exhaling with strain. “Bite your tongue, pinch your leg, *whatever you have to do*-- just make sure you don’t screw up how the kingdom sees you tomorrow. This goes for all of you.”

Niki looks like she wants to protest.

Tubbo sighs.

George... all George can do is stare at the map, at the flickering image of Fortuna’s people.

There’s a soft pause, a give in the conversation.

“Alright, I think I’ve been serious enough,” Bad says sheepishly. “Don’t sweat it. I think you’re going to do fine. The meeting is tomorrow in the meeting hall-- the formal one, you’re probably aware of it-- it’s there, just before dusk. Don’t be late. And it’ll go well, Fortuna willing.”

“Fortuna willing,” Niki echoes as she stands up. “Come on, Wil, I think we should go.”

Wilbur nods, moving from where he was leaning against the wall to follow Niki out of the Archives.

“Fortuna willing,” Tubbo murmurs. “Tommy, I think we should go visit the orchard or something. Let’s go.”

Tommy snickers, nodding a little.

“Yeah, alright,” Tommy says. “Let’s go.”

Dream hums a little.

“You ready to go, Your Majesty?” Dream asks from somewhere behind George. George nods, pushing up from his chair.

“Mhm,” George answers. “Let’s go.” As he turns to leave, he hears Bad clear his throat.

“Your Majesty,” Bad says. “Before-- before you go.” George turns his head to see Bad fumbling with one of the paper cranes, unfolding it to read its contents. Bad’s gaze is a mixture of desperation and... *hope* . “For the sake of the kingdom... we’re counting on you, Your Majesty. Do your best.”

George feels a lump rising in his throat, and he nods.

“I will,” George says, his voice more even than he expects.

Bad smiles.

“Alright, Your Majesty. Be well,” Bad says, waving George off. “Fortuna willing.”

“... Fortuna willing,” George murmurs. “Dream, let’s go.”

Dream nods, following behind George as they step out of the Archives. As the door slams behind them, there’s another pause. It feels charged, crackling with some foreign force.

“Jeez, no pressure, huh?” Dream snickers.

A strained smile rises on George’s lips, a laugh leaving his lips.

“No pressure,” George echoes sarcastically. “Totally.”

Dream wheezes a little, reaching out a hand to lean against the wall as he laughs. George snorts a little, covering his mouth to muffle the laugh.

“But... seriously,” Dream says, wiping a stray tear from his eye. “Are you sure you’re okay? It’s... a *lot* of pressure.”

George swallows, shaking his head a little.

“No, yeah, I... I’m fine. I think it’ll turn out okay,” George says. “Don’t worry too much about it.”

“Well, I can’t help it.” Dream’s words roll off his tongue easily. “I’m always worrying about you, Your Majesty.” There’s an unspoken truth to his words-- George can’t resist believing him.

“You--” George starts, fighting a light flush of embarrassment. “You weirdo.” He hopes Dream hears the appreciation in his voice. “Let’s just... go back to our room. ‘M tired-- we can find something to do there, I guess.”

Dream smiles softly. “Alright, Your Majesty.” He gestures exaggeratedly down the hall. “After you, sir.”

George snorts and rolls his eyes at Dream’s antics, deciding not to comment on it and just start walking down the hall. They walk in silence, passing by the decorations littering the hall as they bleed from unfamiliar to familiar.

With nothing but the sound of their footsteps to occupy George’s mind, he feels himself wander and digest the atmosphere-- one that feels... strange. He can’t avoid the feeling that this is the eye of the storm; the calm before the hurricane’s waves hit, destroying all he’d bothered to build.

He wrings his hands and breathes deep.

It feels like a last-ditch attempt to get oxygen into his lungs, right before the waves pull him under.

Chapter End Notes

Are we ready for the dual updates? I know I am!

The calm before the storm...

---

Songs I listened to while penning this chapter:

Hello, My Old Heart

Like the Dawn

I Was Wrong

The Truth was a Cave

Vitality (Helltaker OST)

Energetic (Wanna One)

I won't babble on in these chapter notes, especially because another chapter's dropping, but thank you for the support and I hope you enjoyed this chapter. Let me know your thoughts in the comments :]

## Chapter 13

### Chapter Summary

As dusk falls, George feels his heart fall into his stomach.

“Is it time?” George asks.

“Yeah,” Dream says, pushing up from his chair. “... Let’s go, Your Majesty.”

George swallows the lump growing in his throat, trying not to let his nervousness show.

“Alright,” George murmurs. “Let’s... get this over with.”

### Chapter Notes

I'll be putting a content warning for this chapter:

tw // execution , attempted manipulation

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

George stands in a crowd of people.

He feels it prominently-- the uncomfortable breathing of the people surrounding him, the heat of the sun as it beats down on his face. He’s dressed in a dark cloak, watching as a sea of faceless people splits.

His face pales when he realizes what the sea of people are standing in front of.

A worn execution stand.

And then his heart drops to his stomach when he realizes--

His *father* .

His father's feet and hands are bound.

He's kneeling on the stand, murmuring in a voice that, for all intents and purposes, shouldn't be audible, and yet his father's voice rings in his ears.

"For you, a thousand times over."

It drones on and on, filling George's ears and consuming his mind.

*For you, a thousand times over.*

George tries to look into the crowd, his searching eyes passing the faceless bystanders to suddenly--

*Dream.*

Dream stands in the crowd, his gaze fixated on the execution stand. His eyes are dark, unreadable-- and suddenly George finds himself rooted to the spot, unable to approach him. His gaze is forced upwards to watch as the king-- *why is the king at an execution?* -- takes a sword from the executioner. The king's face is obscured in shadow, his expression hidden entirely. The king grips the sword, testing its grip.

George feels the choking dread overcoming him.

He opens his mouth to scream, but his voice catches in his throat, the scream stifled completely.

The king raises his head.

And then George realizes--

It's *him* -- he's wearing the crown.

He's holding the sword--

He's holdi--

He--

His face, cruel and so *unlike him*-- a stranger wearing his own face--

George watches as he swings down--

The sword goes straight through his father's neck.

“DAD--!”

George jolts up, the scream dying on his lips. He looks down at his fingers, his grip white-knuckled and clenched in the bedsheets. He watches as a tear falls into his lap, and he raises a trembling hand to touch at his face. It comes away wet.

“Mm... George?” Dream murmurs.

George jolts up, looking down at Dream's sleepy expression. He's not sure what the expression on his face is, but Dream suddenly looks more alert as he sits up.

“Your Majesty,” Dream tries. “What's wrong--” Dream attempts to reach out a hand to touch George's arm, but George immediately jolts back even before Dream can cross the expanse. Dream's face flashes with understanding, and he sets his hand down.

“It--” George says falteringly, his breath coming out uneven. “It's nothing, Dream. Go back to sleep.”

“George--”

“I mean it,” George gets out. “*Please*.”



Dream's lips part, and he looks like he wants to protest-- but George shoots him what he hopes is a desperate glance, and Dream nods uneasily.

"Alright," Dream murmurs. "I'm right here if you need to talk." With that, Dream lies back down and the bed gives under his weight as he shifts.

George waits until he hears Dream's even breathing to let the waterworks burst.

His chest heaves with sobs, his shoulders trembling as he tries to stifle the noises coming out of his mouth, failing to rub away the tears cascading down his cheeks.

He pushes down the urge to reach out for Dream.

Because he *can't* let Dream see him like this-- can't be reduced to something so weak and fragile. Because he's *not* . Because he's not a branch that will break under too much wind-- because he's not a porcelain pot that will shatter if it's treated roughly.

He's *not* .

He doesn't know how long he spends crying and rubbing roughly at his face, but the sun starts filtering in through the window.

His throat feels like it's been rubbed raw, his chest still heaving with a weight that wraps around his lungs, spiny thorns that threaten to choke the air out of him altogether. It hurts so badly to breathe.

Dream sits up, dark circles prominent under his eyes.

It doesn't look like Dream's gotten much sleep either.

As George begins the process of buttoning up his clothes, he realizes his hands are shaking. They slip on the edge of the round buttons, catching against the raised thread of the embroidery.

For some reason, he feels a strange sense of foreboding. Whether it was because of the nightmare, his lack of sleep, or the fact he'd spent the latter half of the night crying-- he has the distinct feeling something's going to go wrong. Or maybe it's all of that, all at once.

Well, whatever the feeling possessing him is-- he hopes that that's all it is: a feeling.

They spend the better half of the day just killing time.

They talk about nothing in particular, just empty phrases to fill the silence.

"Do you want to play chess?" Dream offers suddenly as he sits up from where he's currently slumped. "I think I could probably go and find a chessboard or something."

"Chess?" George snickers. "You sure?"

"Deadly sure," Dream says seriously as he stands up. "I am bored out of my mind."

"Well, sorry I'm not better company," George sighs dramatically, leaning a hand on his cheek. In reality, he knows he's really in no mental state to be making conversation-- but he jokes about it nonetheless. It doesn't stop the quip from weighing heavily, though, sticking somewhere in his mind.

"You are," Dream assures, his voice a touch more sincere than George expects it to be. "Good company, I mean. But... we've been talking about birds for the last hour or so. I think we should try something else."

"Alright," George says, a bit of finality to his voice. "Go find a chessboard then."

"You'll be fine on your own for a bit?" Dream asks.

George nods.

"Yeah, I'll be fine. Just come back quick."

Dream nods back, giving George a mock-salute before exiting the bedroom.

As the door slams, George looks down at his hands.

They're still shaking.

His mind whirls with the possible outcomes of this meeting-- all the bad and the good that can come out of it-- but mostly the bad. *What if I get mocked? Made fun of? What happens if they don't listen--*

*What happens if I find out I'm just--*

*Not made for this?*

Dream comes back into the room, closing the door behind him with a soft thump.

"Found a chessboard," he announces. "And some chess and checker pieces. If you want to play checkers."

"No, I think-- I think I'd much rather play chess," George answers honestly as Dream sits down, setting up the small wooden game board and depositing a velvet bag containing a bunch of small, wooden game pieces across it. George watches as Dream sets the pieces up in silence, working swiftly.

*He has really long eyelashes,* George thinks suddenly.

*Why did I think that?*

*What is wrong with me?*

"Alright, there we go," Dream says after he finishes setting up the board. "Are you up for some speed chess?"

“I’ve... never really played much chess,” George says. “So I’ll probably be bad, but... sure.”

Turns out, George *is* very bad at chess.

Maybe it’s both a combination of his ineptitude as well as the fact he’s really not in a good mental state to be focused on a game *like* chess.

"That's checkmate, George." Dream comments, George snapping out of his stupor to refocus on the chessboard.

"Wha-- a checkmate? How?" George stammers, only for Dream to tap at the board between them.

"You were so focused on protecting your king from my rook that you didn't even notice the bishop," Dream explains. "Sure, you had a knight to protect you, but in your tunnel vision you sent it to destroy my rook and left yourself wide open." His finger rests upon the board to draw an invisible line between the black Bishop and white king.

"Wait, how did--" George starts, only to be cut off by the sounds of clacking wood. Dream smirks a little, setting the pieces back into place.

"Bishop to E2. You stay where you are, you lose. You try to retreat, you move into range of my queen, you lose. You take my bishop, and there's a knight with its sword to your king's throat, and you lose," Dream says patiently. "That's checkmate, George."

“Fuck,” George says softly. “Alright then.”

“You’ve gotta be way better at strategy than this,” Dream snickers. “You’ll get blindsided by stuff otherwise.”

“I don’t know about that one, Dream,” George murmurs. “I think I should leave strategy up to people who know what they’re doing.”

Dream hums at that.

“Fair,” Dream responds. “But Bad would say something like— ahem, *the royal court is like a chessboard*. So, with that logic, I think being good at chess might help you navigate that better.”

“That sounds like something you pulled straight out of your ass to spite me,” George snickers, leaning back in his seat. “But okay.”

“I swear I’m not,” Dream protests, fighting down a chuckle. “I *swear* .”

“Alright, alright. Whatever you say,” George hums. “Wanna have a rematch?”

“Mm... fuck it. Sure, let’s go,” Dream says.

The time passes by.

Chess draws on monotonously, with only the click and clack of wooden pieces against the board. George’s stomach whirls with butterflies, his mind starting to fog as the metaphorical hour of reckoning draws closer. His breath catches in his throat.

Eret comes in to primp George up about an hour before they have to head down to the meeting hall, but George doesn’t remember it, really. It flies past him, like wind filtering through tree branches.

As dusk falls, George feels his heart fall into his stomach.

“Is it time?” George asks.

“Yeah,” Dream says, pushing up from his chair. “... Let’s go, Your Majesty.”

George swallows the lump growing in his throat, trying not to let his nervousness show.

“Alright,” George murmurs. “Let’s... get this over with.”

As they pass by the door, Dream stops.

“Your Majesty,” Dream says suddenly.

“Huh?” George asks. His heart suddenly stops in his chest as Dream turns around, gesturing to the crown still placed on the vanity.

“You have to put the crown on,” Dream says softly. “Did you forget?”

*Ah.*

“No,” George murmurs, the lie weighing on his tongue. “I didn’t.”

Dream hums, but doesn’t say anything else.

George reaches out to take the crown. It feels light, as if nothing is amiss. And yet George dreads putting it on-- because he knows once it gets put on his head, it’ll start weighing heavily on him. It’ll draw those horrible feelings from him-- horrible, overwhelming nausea that will make him sick, cloud his judgement.

*Just put it on.*

*Don’t make it worse.*

George raises the crown, putting it on his head. It rests there, a presence against his skull.

He squares his shoulders and steps into the hallway.

The walk to the meeting hall is silent.

Silvery light starts to filter through the palace as the moon starts to rise into the night sky, blots of

silver ink against a dark blue. The closer George steps towards the meeting hall, the more nervous he becomes-- pinpricks rise on the back of his neck, his hands shaking. He can't think.

The doors to the meeting hall are pale.

Birch, maybe?

It makes the hair stand up on the back of his neck, sends a strange wave of fear down his body.

Dream reaches out a hand to push open the door, letting George step through.

It feels like he's entering a completely new world as he steps through the door.

The air feels cloying, scented sweetly with vanilla and rose. A large oak table spans the room, lit with white candles. A few paper lanterns float in the sky, creating a softer glow than the artificial glare of the chandeliers from the dining hall. And yet, it somehow doesn't soothe George's nerves at all. A few dignitaries are standing around the table, quietly chatting with each other. Tubbo and Niki are milled together, whispering to each other in a corner of the room. Tommy and Wilbur, too, are hanging in their own corner, quietly observing the situation. When George steps through, some of the dignitaries fall silent, turning to look at him.

George can't help but notice some of their glances seem more like glares.

He hears whispers.

They crawl up his skin, making his mind spin.

Dream puts his hand on the small of George's back, a reassuring warmth.

He can do this.

Or so he hopes.

Once Tubbo and Niki catch George's presence, Niki waves slightly, gesturing George to step closer.

George breaks away from Dream, walking closer to the two.

"Hello," Niki says in a conspiratorial whisper. Her voice drops to something more concerned, slightly worried. "Minx is here."

"Minx?" George responds.

"Minx," Tubbo affirms. "Minx is... she's bad news. She's got... a lot of sway here. In court." He glances around at some of the other dignitaries, shuddering a little. "She sympathized deeply with the old king. I would say she was his favorite, but it was more like he was *her* favorite. So to speak. Some kind of power imbalance."

George glances around at the dignitaries again, resting his eyes on a woman dressed in an ornate black gown, idly fanning herself with a decorative fan.

"Is it her?" George murmurs, trying not to gesture too obviously to the woman. He watches as the woman turns to another dignitary, whispering quietly.

"Yeah," Tubbo whispers back. "She's kinda... scary. Honestly."

Niki sighs, reaching a hand to pinch at her brow.

"Alright," Niki murmurs. "Enough staring. We have to start this meeting one way or another. Let's hold our tongues and try to get through it."

Tubbo nods.

"You'll do great, George," Niki says softly. "I believe in you."



George swallows, reaching a hand to adjust the crown on his head. It's starting to weigh heavily, press down on his temples.

*I just need to get through this, George thinks. Just get through this, and everything will be okay.*

He takes a step forward, towards the table.

The king moves forward on the execution block, and George watches--

*Stop thinking about it.*

*Stop.*

The king flexes the sword in his grip--

*Stop--*

"Thank you for coming, everyone," George says as he rests his hands on the back of his seat. "I assure you this won't take long-- but I feel we have much to discuss about the future of Fortuna under my rule."

His voice is far too even for the throbbing fear in his mind, the whistling of the wind as he plummets down, down, down--

Dream pulls out the chair for him and George sits down.

Tubbo and Niki sit down as well, Wilbur and Tommy hanging by their respective partners. Niki's eyes gaze straight ahead, fixated on something George can't see. Tubbo looks vaguely uncomfortable, shifting in his seat restlessly.

And George?

George flexes his hands, willing them to remain still.

Minx folds her fan, setting it on the table.

“So, Your Majesty,” she begins. “I think we ought to talk about the most important thing here, which is the economy’s rapid decline.”

“I—” George tries to raise his voice, but Minx raises a hand and interrupts him before he can say anything.

“Inflation’s happenin’ rapidly, as I’m sure everyone here is aware,” Minx continues. Some of the other dignitaries nod in agreement, making murmurs of assent. “Banks no longer have adequate supplies of gold and silver, and so they’re starting to create blank coins. I know I speak for most of the people here when I say that our pockets are starting to empty, even with the amount of money we have available to us. Prices are simply rising too quickly and the value of our money is falling too quickly to match. I believe it’d be in the best interest of everyone here if this issue was provided some kind of resolution— or a *promise* that it will.”

Niki clears her throat.

“Well, *I* personally think—” Niki says, her voice sharp, but Minx interrupts her again.

“You think *what* ,” Minx says simply. “Last I checked, I wasn’t talking to you. I was talking to the *king* .”

Niki smiles pleasantly, a laugh leaving her lips. Her laugh doesn’t reach her eyes.

“And another thing,” Minx says. “In a similar vein *to* inflation— due to the heavy costs of supplies and workers’ wages, I’ve been unable to expand construction of my... estates.”

George swallows down an immediate retort of *I don’t see how that’s my problem*.

Some of the other dignitaries nod.

“I think the solution to this is quite simple, Your Majesty.” Minx lifts a manicured hand, observing it with a passive look. “You could, perhaps, lower the required wages to give to construction workers— or perhaps we could send out troops in search of mines to track down more silver and gold— resources so that the banks have value behind the currency.”

Niki’s gaze grows stormy at Minx’s suggestion.

From the corner of his eye, George sees Niki’s fist balling underneath the table, clenching at her dress so hard he’s surprised she doesn’t tear right through it.

George’s mind spins unpleasantly now, the horrible sense of vertigo climbing higher.

“While that’s a problem and all, I’m sure— this isn’t the purpose of today’s meeting,” George says, raising a hand to keep Minx from interrupting him. His nerves start to rise, but his voice remains level, even as his emotions start to become tumultuous. “We should address the root of the problem— that Fortuna’s people are *suffering*. People are impoverished and starving, and I believe we could start by providing relief to the towns just outside the castle. From my point of view, the castle already has a surplus of food— surely we could deliver that to people in desperate need of aid. For towns further along, I suggest that we could send caravans out bearing resources, like oil and wheat.”

The room falls silent at his suggestion.

George feels the eyes in the room fixating on him.

The horrible sensation of feeling *watched* sends a wave of horrible, choking warmth down his body. His mind starts screaming at him to run, but he can’t even move. He feels rooted to the spot, paralyzed by thorny vines pressing into him. His face feels hot.

“Perhaps it’s a bit of a naive viewpoint, but—” he says hesitantly, but he’s interrupted.

Minx laughs.

“*Naive* , Your Majesty?” Minx sneers. “Naive doesn’t even begin to *describe* what you just said.”

“I—” George begins.

Minx reaches for her fan, unfurling it and fanning herself ever so gently. Her gaze rakes over George, a condescending and slow gesture.

“I didn’t come here,” she says slowly, “to waste my time hearing a naive, *foolish* king tell me he’s going to ruin my entire life because he wants to save a few *nobodies*. ”

“They’re— they’re not just *nobodies* ,” Tubbo blurts out.

Minx’s gaze shifts to Tubbo.

Tubbo looks like he’s scared out of his mind.

“I-I mean,” Tubbo squeaks out. “They’re our— they’re our—” His voice dies down as Minx simply snaps her fan shut. A warning? A threat? George isn’t sure. His mind is fogging up, his fingers starting to tingle. This doesn’t feel real. He feels like he’s just— watching himself, unable to do anything—

Niki looks positively incensed.

She opens her mouth to speak, but George interrupts.

“Prince Tubbo’s right,” George says, his voice stable and unshaken. He can’t say the same for his hands, which are starting to tremble ever so slightly. “They are *our people* and *our responsibility*. This kingdom is *nothing* without them.”

Minx sits back.

And then a cruel, harsh laugh leaves her lips.

“You can’t be serious,” she murmurs. “Is this the approach you’re going with, Your Majesty?” Minx fans herself once more, slowly inching closer to George. “This *foolish* little attempt to appeal to greater morality will get you nowhere. And I suggest that you learn your *place*, Your Majesty.”

It feels like the air has been taken out of George’s lungs.

He can’t even formulate a response.

He opens his mouth, *tries* to speak, but Minx presses forward.

“You understand, surely. That when *push comes to shove*,” Minx enunciates, “*we* are the ones you will turn to for financial backing. For support. You’ll get nowhere with the common folk, who are so busy trying to live out their own *self-centered lives* that they won’t even lift a finger to support you. Even if you *help* them. I suggest you think long and hard about what kind of policies you want to pursue, *Your Majesty*.”

Her voice becomes venomous, her lip curling a little as she speaks.

George’s mind spins.

His head throbs, right where the crown rests against it.

Even though the room’s stationary— it feels like he’s floating from high above, being flung down into a dark abyss below. An ocean, pulling him down deep into its cold, unforgiving depths.

His vision starts to blur at the edges, and he blinks hard in an attempt to clear it.

It... doesn’t work.

Minx lets put a soft, breathy giggle as she fans herself delicately.

Just once.

She turns to another woman sitting besides her, and says, in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear,

“Such foolishness... he reminds me so much of the old king. Don’t you think?”

At this, George feels like he’s about to crack.

He stifles whatever noise is trying to tear itself from his throat, and his grip on the table turns his fingers white-knuckled. Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Niki’s face pale, and Tubbo has his hands clapped over his mouth.

Minx’s lips curl again as she then says, mockingly—

“Isn’t he just wasting our time?”

A few of the dignitaries chuckle.

George feels like he’s *plummeting*.

He’s falling through the sky, the air whistling around him, terrified for his life— because he’s alone. His mind goes numb, goes *blank*.

The tips of his fingers tremble ever so slightly.

The back of his eyes burn with heat.

His head starts to *ache*, painful and unforgiving.

He tries to wrap his mind around all of this.

But what is there to wrap his mind around?

He's *alone* , and there's nobody to defend him.

The silence is deafening. It roars in George's ears, somewhere deep in his chest.

"I think I've said my piece," George says softly, his voice trembling somewhat at the end. "Thank you for your consideration."

He stands up, pressing his hands on the table as he pushes off from his chair.

His hands...

George tries to look past how they *shake* , reaching up to grip the edge of his cape to try and steady them. His grip goes white-knuckled immediately, and he tries desperately to hold back the hot tears that he knows are coming.

"Dream," George whispers now, because the shaking in his voice is becoming more and more evident by the second— "We're leaving."

Dream looks at him, concern in his eyes, but says nothing else as they turn to exit the meeting hall.

"Your Majesty!" Niki calls, a worried note entering her voice. He heard a scraping noise. No doubt she wants to give chase, to ask him what's wrong—

George shifts his gaze to Dream's.

"Your Grace," Dream says, turning to address Niki. "We're taking our leave. I suggest you take yours as well." George shoots Dream a grateful glance, though he's not sure whether Dream catches on, because he's still looking at Niki with an impassive gaze. "Come, Your Majesty. Let's go."

The door to the meeting hall slams shut.

But it doesn't give George any sense of relief.

They idle near the door for a few seconds while he tries to organize his thoughts.

*The old king?* George thinks to himself; he feels the nausea settling in his stomach grow as he mulls over it. *I wouldn't-- I couldn't ever--* His mind wanders back to his nightmare. He recalls the deafening silence, the terror gnawing at his gut at the image of... himself.

He feels his temple pulse at the base of the crown-- the same one that he adorned in that hellscape. The pressure stabs him just behind his eyes, forcing him to inhale deeply.

George tries to drown out the details as he focuses on the very simple task of walking back to their room.

Left, right. Left, right. One foot in front of the other. It's all he can manage right now.

Dream is with him, following behind from a short distance. George is aware he's there, he's been there the entire time, standing behind his chair as a quiet reminder. Dream was there the entire time. Though, he didn't have the capacity to acknowledge him just yet.

George feels his vision wavering-- his pace quickening as the door to their bedroom comes closer into view.

*Left, right. Left, right. One foot in front of the other.* He's almost there, close enough where he can let all of this pass--

"Are you... feeling alright, Your Majesty? You don't seem well," Dream asks cautiously in a hushed tone.

His words cut George like a knife. Sharp and deep, right where it's hurting.



George snaps back to reality, and all at once, it's too much again.

He keeps walking.

Dream doesn't press him further, likely saving it for a time where George doesn't seem so on-edge.

George makes it to the familiar blue door first, not bothering for Dream to open the door for him. He pushes the door open and hears Dream usher past him, saying... *something*. Everything's a bit warbly at the moment, he can't decipher the words fully.

He thinks he hears a few groans-- he recognizes a few words. It sounds like Dream's complaining about the dignitaries. George's mind hazes at the reminder. The tone of Dream's voice gets softer, yet fades more as George's mind completely tunes him out and catches up to speed with the day.

It was... entirely not him.

He isn't *built* for this.

It's not that he's weak, or particularly easy to break-- he's just *tired*.

He's not built for a lifetime of continuous stress, one where his patience is continually tested, where his strings are pulled to the point of splitting apart.

George just went through the worst few hours of his life, talking to people who treated lives like they were nothing more than dirt on their fine clothes, watching as his words fell on deaf, uncaring ears. It's not something he's built to handle.

*I just want to be alone.*

That seems to have become his catchphrase these days, even as he grows accustomed to the unwavering presence of other people around him.

Dream's voice registers in his ears again, but it sounds like he's hearing him from underwater.

George feels like he's sinking underwater into a bottomless, black ocean where not even the light can touch him. George's eyes are glossing over, thick tears beginning to soundlessly fall from his eyes. His knees feel wobbly.

The room falls silent, Dream's voice seeming to die on his tongue at the sight of the king's state.

George's ears are suddenly far too keen, picking up Dream's alarmed voice shouting out, "Your Majesty! Oh god, *what-* "

George falls to his knees, his shaking knees finally buckling.

He takes one breath in to try and steady himself... but it fails immediately. As he inhales, his sorrow overtakes him. Hot tears spill over the edges of his eyes as he crumbles in on himself, shielding his face with shaking breaths.

The further he tries to calm himself, the worse he becomes; his shaking breaths turn into hiccups, and his wails turn into near-screams. He feels like a building that had been scheduled for a demolition that was far overdue-- the foundation finally cracking from the pressure that should've been relieved long ago, breaking a sturdy structure to rubble.

George feels small.

He's crying like a toddler separated from his mother at the market, here in his room with no one but his knight to see. His knight-- right. George almost forgot he's here. Watching him.

George sits up to try and face Dream, aggressively wiping his tears with the palms of his hands as he straightens his back. Through his watery eyes he sees Dream staring at him with as much caution in his eyes as he had for the horse that day they went to the stables-- it's almost like Dream was approaching him as if he's a scared animal.

In reality, that isn't really too far off.

He *is* scared.

He's scared he can't *do* this.

He's scared he's not strong enough for this.

He's scared he never will be.

It terrifies him that he'll let them down.

Nothing he can do right now could change that, though. All he can do is keep wiping the tears from his cheeks and will his tear ducts to dry up. To let him move on from this. Push it back down and keep pretending like this hasn't been affecting him.

George is sure his face is red and puffy, not just from crying, but from the violent way his palms have been rubbing his eyes raw for the past minute or so.

Dream approaches him slowly with caution, careful not to startle him. As he draws closer, George sees his face morph from one of soft concern into something far more pained.

His face has a visible strain to it as he searches for the right words to say. He opens and closes his mouth in shock, but eventually, he directs his soft gaze directly into George's.

"Hey... what-what's going on?" Dream's voice is quiet, secure. Just for George.

George looks up to meet Dream's eyes, his own once again brimming with tears along with the motion.

Wordlessly, without breaking the eye contact, George reaches up to grab the crown off his head. A weight is immediately pulled off of him, but not nearly enough to muffle his breakdown.

Between the lack of sleep from the night-terror and the second he was told he had to wear *the* crown to the meeting, the dread had begun crawling it's way through his stomach, fighting it's way

up his throat and threatening to spill out.

Clearly, it found a way to overflow.

George flicks his gaze back down to the crown in his hands, emotions splitting through him like a wildfire. Intense hatred and nausea roil in his gut, clouds his head. He feels like a firecracker lit from both ends, threatening a fatal explosion that'll hurt *so* much worse than if he were to just act now.

So he does.

George throws the crown directly towards the wall opposing them, shattering it to pieces. The pieces fall onto the floor like cracked plaster. It feels good in the moment, but instantly after, he regrets it. The crown's just another thing he's broken, another thing he *doesn't deserve*. The thoughts from earlier began flooding back in through the now-broken walls of George's mental dam.

*He's scared he's not strong enough for this.*

George... doesn't feel anything anymore. All of his emotions just shattered along with that heirloom crown, and he doesn't know what to do now. He looks up to Dream again, desperate for some form of security.

Dream seems on edge, positively worried out of his mind; he looks like he's either going to lunge for George or make a run for it, George can't tell which one he's leaning towards. He feels his eyes well up again under Dream's concerned stare.

George knows he needs to talk to get this off his chest, but he hesitates.

His voice is nearly inaudible as he finds a place to begin.

"Well-- you heard them," He laughs wetly. "They just-- they think I'm *naive*. That 'm a child who has *no* idea what he's talking about; and apparently even *they* think I'm like the old king." As George pauses, he blinks and lets a few more tears fall.

It's hard not to fall back into his own head.

To feel the disappointed eyes, to hear the barely-hidden snide and condescending whispers, to see the barely-concealed smirks and subtle shakes of heads, to smell the nauseating scent of incense and perfume.

George swallows the lump building in his throat. He isn't going to cry again. He can't break down, not now.

George starts wringing his hands, waving his arms around weakly as he tries to gesture exactly what it is he's feeling. The words coalesce on the tip of his tongue, but they slip from his fingers like running water. Like slivers of wind.

"I'm a *pathetic* excuse for a king-- Fortuna, no matter *what* I do," George's voice shrinks even further as he changes his words. "I never wanted this *fucking* throne anyway. I-I just... I just want to go *home*." His voice completely dies as he lets out the last sentence. George lets his hands fall to his lap.

George isn't sure Dream heard exactly all of what he had said, but he's torn. Part of him hopes *dearly* that he heard every word. That he'd understand and want to help him-- but he knows what Dream is like. He's a knight, not a friend; he's said it himself. That they can't cross boundaries. That they have to remain professional.

Even if George feels they've grown closer, he's still certain that Dream will raise his barriers, remain formal, and just remind George that he's "got potential". That he "shouldn't give up". Just empty reassurances spat from an equally empty, meaningless face that he thought was anything but. And yet, he wishes so *badly* for Dream to tell him anything other than those mind-numbing words that got him in this position in the first place.

He closes in on himself, fortifying to prepare for that same speech he's heard so many times before. George can see Dream shift in his peripheral-- he inhales and closes his eyes, readying himself to hear those empty words. He builds up the walls in his heart, trying desperately to fight off his inevitable disappointment.

...

It doesn't come.

George feels two warm hands gently cup his cheeks. The thumbs slowly wipe away the still-falling drops of water from his eyes. Opening his eyes, George is met with the same concerned green eyes he saw just prior, but this time, right up close. He watches his knight scan his face hurriedly, seemingly doing so while organizing his thoughts on what to say.

Dream draws in a breath, but suddenly lets it go.

George watches him intently, letting his eyes mull over his face.

*He's so much closer than usual*, is all George can force himself to acknowledge at the moment. Dream's hand feels like kindling, pulling all of George's perception to it.

Suddenly, George feels Dream's hand withdraw from his face as he flicks his arm out in a rushed movement towards the fragmented crown. Muttering some words under his breath that George could hardly hear, let alone understand, George watches as the crown suddenly begins to shudder as Dream's hand is bathed in a golden glow. The crown pulls its pieces back towards itself, slowly stitching itself back together piece by painful piece. The mending job is clumsy— golden filaments spread from its cracks like tree branches. Silently, George acknowledges the permanent marks on the crown as a part of his legacy, a permanent mark he's left upon the castle. A sign of his kingship, for worse or for better. The shifting, golden glow dissipates somewhat as Dream crooks his fingers, and the crown is jerked towards his open hand.

A beat of silence passes between them.

George doesn't even know where to begin about what Dream has just done, let alone why. Luckily, he's saved by a hesitant, lopsided smile from the man across from him. Dream stares intently into George's face, leaving him feeling like Dream could see the exact thoughts that George is stuck in.

Slowly, Dream lifts his hands up, placing the crown back on George's head.

It feels no less heavy as it had before.

It settles uncomfortably, and George feels another horrible wave of nausea running over him.

George's mouth goes dry. He has no idea what to say. He opens his mouth to ask a question, demand *answers* , but he's quickly interrupted.

"Oh George," Dream begins in a reluctant yet soft tone. George's heart skips a beat at the usage of his name.

In a swift movement, George is being embraced in a soul-crushing hug.

Dream speaks again, voice barely above a whisper. Like the faintest murmur of rolling thunder. "*You've been so strong.* "

At this, George shatters.

The few small shreds of composure he was holding onto have just slipped through his fingers, falling out of reach. George hasn't felt this level of care and concern since his mother passed-- he didn't realize how much he needed it.

He forgot how nice it was to be cared for when he feels like the sky is falling around him. How it felt to not feel so small.

He throws his arms around Dream, digging his fingers into the back of his under-shirt, sobbing like he had been when he first walked into the room. George is falling apart at the seams, but for the first time in a *long* time, he has someone there to stitch him back up. Hands to press his cracked edges back together, to wear his caustic edges smooth.

George's soul pours out into the neckline of his knight, his most trusted friend, *his* Dream.

It's the first time George realizes Dream wasn't lying when he said he'd always be there for him, always by his side-- not just as his knight, but as his friend.

...

It's also, coincidentally, when Dream gets hit with a crippling realization-- a realization that how he feels isn't *just* infatuation-- he's fallen in love. *Hard*.

## Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading :]

This was a big chapter, and I've honestly been super excited to write this. Ch 13's climax was penned by Stick, the third coauthor of Lucky Charm. Make sure to give them LOTS of compliments in the comments below, keysmash, do whatever. Just show your appreciation because it's so fucking good.

---

Songs I listened to while penning this chapter:

Lapis Lazuli

Boreas

Soap

Rounds

Between (CIKI)

Devil (CLC)

---

I think Soap is a super good song for this chapter, honestly. What do you all think?

Thank you for all the support on Lucky Charm, and Happy New Year :]



# Chapter 14

## Chapter Summary

“If you don’t want to, then don’t,” Dream says. “We’re on break for today.”

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

George opens his eyes to find himself lying in a field.

The golden sun beats down on his face-- not harshly, but gentle, like a warm embrace of warmth and heat. The grass tickles the back of his neck pleasantly, the smell of damp earth calming and familiar. He sits up, tries to gather his surroundings. Out of the corner of his ear, he hears a river, bubbling pleasantly.

*Where am I?*

George looks down, finding himself in his old clothes.

They almost chafe uncomfortably-- rough cotton against his smooth skin.

George pushes himself up from the ground, standing up.

He hears humming coming from his right.

He turns his head, seeing a woman sitting close to the river, right at the sandy riverbank. Her hands, delicate and small, are weaving a basket out of the cattail reeds. Her motions are practiced, her fingers deftly overlapping the reeds and tugging on them.

The tune sounds familiar.

“ *Well, It’s a long climb up the dusty mountain,* ” he hears. The song’s melody, swooping and gentle, floods his ears in a way that makes his heart squeeze with nostalgia. But how can it be?

*“To build a turret wall tall enough to keep you out.”*

He knows this song.

He knows it well.

*“And when you wage your wars against the one who adores you,”* George sings falteringly, his voice cracking a little as he approaches the woman, still sitting close to the river. His voice sounds rough, uneven, in comparison to the woman’s gentle, smooth voice.

*“Then you’ll never know the treasure that you’re worth.”*

His eyes finally widen in recognition when he gets close enough.

He doesn’t know how he’d managed to forget his mother’s brown hair, always curled precisely behind her ears. Or her hands, how they’d felt in his own. How they’d grown frailer, thin enough to feel the withering bone.

*Don’t.*

“Mom?” George calls, his voice cracking again. “Is that-- is that you?”

The woman turns, and she smiles. The smile is familiar, her eyes crinkling a little.

“Hello, dear,” his mother says kindly. “Long time no see.”

“Mom,” George repeats, his voice disbelieving. “That-- are you-- am I dreaming?”

His mother grins.

“Maybe you are,” his mother teases gently. “But does that change this?” Her head turns back to the basket, weaving it under her fingers.

“...” George inhales. “No, mom.” His exhale comes out shaky, uneven. “I... I missed you.”

“I know,” his mother says. “Sit next to me.” Her hand retracts from her weaving long enough to pat at the space next to her, and George swallows. He feels his Adam’s apple bob a little as he steps onto the sandy shore, digging his toes into the smooth sand. He lowers himself down, sitting next to her to watch her engrossed in her work.

“Isn’t this like old times, George?” his mother says.

George nods.

“Yeah,” George murmurs.

His mother smiles knowingly.

“You look tired,” she says. “Have you been eating?”

“I’ve--” George swallows. “I’ve... had a rough month.”

His mother pauses.

“I can tell,” she says fondly. “You’ve never been able to hide anything from me. Your father? Maybe. But not your mother.”

George leans forward, wrapping his arms around his knees.

“I just...” he murmurs. “It’s been tough. All of this-- I-- I don’t know what I’m doing, mom. It-- it feels like I’m letting you down. Feels like I’m letting down dad, too... just-- after all he’d done for us, after *everything* --”

“George,” his mother says sternly. “Don’t say that. Your father and I... we’re proud of you. No matter what. You’re our *son* .”

George buries his face in his knees, trying to stifle the oncoming tears.

“I-- I don’t know--”

“George,” his mother repeats. “Look at me.”

George doesn’t move his head.

“Don’t be stubborn, dear,” she teases, reaching out to shove him a little. “Look at me.” George lifts his head unwillingly, meeting his mother’s warm eyes. Brown, like his own. His father always said that his mother’s eyes had flecks of gold and green, like a forest full of dappled light-- and he thinks he can almost see it now. His mother’s eyes shine golden, stern and yet full of reassuring warmth, like a gentle hearth.

“You’re doing the best you can,” she says softly. “And we’re proud of you.”

George laughs a little, reaching up to brush at his eyes. The back of his eyes burn with heat, and he sniffs a little.

“You’re just saying that,” he murmurs. “Because it’s a dream, mom. Because you’re just-- saying the things I wish someone would-- would say to me.” *And you can’t, because you’re gone.*

*Because you left me.*

“Just because this is all a dream,” his mother gestures around, at the idyllic field with its river, in the middle of nowhere, “doesn’t mean my words don’t *mean* anything, George. I thought I’d always told you this-- that your dreams are special.”

“I-I guess,” George murmurs. “I-- I just...” He looks up at the sky, dotted with puffy clouds. “I just...” His mouth feels dry, his heart thudding in his chest as he tries to find the right words to describe the feeling bubbling deep within. “I wish I didn’t feel like... something was missing. It-- it just feels like... sometimes I look around and-- it just feels wrong. And I don’t know *why* .”

Something tickles at the back of his mind.

A powerful feeling of *knowing*.

He tries to reach for it, grasp for it-- but it slips through his fingers, and the feeling dissipates, leaving only the feeling of being slightly unsettled in his gut.

His mother hums, leaning forward to set the basket atop the river. It dips a little, slowly being carried away by the river's current.

She turns to George, reaching out a hand to touch his cheek. Her touch is gentle, reassuring. George almost leans into it, despite himself.

"George," she says.

*"You're forgetting something, aren't you?"*

George jolts awake.

The first thing he can feel is the warmth. Secure and tight around him, like a gentler vice. If a vice could be considered gentle. His eyes flit up to find--

*Fuck.*

Dream's arms are wrapped around him, holding George close to his chest. One of Dream's hands has slid up the edge of George's shirt, his hand rough against smooth skin. George tries not to focus on it, tries not to think about it at all-- but he fails. It's-- it's nice. A kind of warmth that almost feels like it's on the side of *too much* , but flirting with the boundary. Dream is still asleep, his breathing slow and even.

Somehow, George feels *safe* .

His mind flits back to the dream.

To how warm it'd been.

It wasn't a nightmare.

For the first time in so long, he hadn't had a nightmare.

That was... nice too.

George flushes a little when he feels Dream pulling him closer-- but Dream's *asleep*, right? So is this on instinct?

Oh, he's really not sure what to think about *that*.

"Dream," George whispers. "It's morning."

Dream's eyes flutter a little, a tired groan leaving his lips. Out of what seems to be instinct-- again-- his grip on George grows tighter. George's face grows warm, and his lips part ever so slightly as he takes a sharp inhale of breath.

"George?" Dream murmurs quietly. His eyes are a bit hazy, clouded with sleep. Once his eyes focus on George's face, they widen a bit in realization. "Shit. Sorry--" His arms pull away from George, and George tries not to think about the fact that he immediately misses the warmth.

"It-- it's fine, Dream," George mutters. "I-- how long did we-- how'd I--"

"I was just... kneeling there for a long while," Dream explains, his voice still thick with sleep. "You were crying... pretty hard. And then-- you kinda-- I don't wanna say that you literally like, passed out... but that's what happened. I guess. I-- I kinda just... I carried you to bed and... it ended up like this."

George swallows.

“ *Oh* ,” he says.

“Oh indeed,” Dream says, his voice somewhat teasing as he sits up on the bed. His gaze softens a little as he watches George. “Hey... real talk though-- are you okay? After yesterday.”

George pauses.

He sits up as well, looking down at the rumpled fabric of his king’s outfit. His hands still feel weak and clammy. His brain hums with static.

*Just like the old king.*

*Don’t you think--*

“Hey.”

George startles a little upon hearing Dream’s voice. His face immediately flushes with embarrassment-- he didn’t know he’d gotten so deep in his head again--

“Look at me,” Dream says softly, leaning in closer to George’s face. His eyes, warm and concerned, crowd George’s vision. It makes George’s heart pound in his chest, bubbles rising in his chest, butterflies fluttering in his fingers. “Tell me what you see.”

George’s mouth goes dry.

“You,” George whispers. “I-- I see-- you.”

Dream chuckles, the sound warm.

“Yeah?” Dream asks. “What else about me?”

“Your-your eyes,” George says, trying to get his tongue to work. “They’re-- you’re looking at me.

Like--”

“Mhm? Like what?” Dream asks patiently, and George’s breath hitches a little as he tries to get his mind to *focus* .

“Like-- all your-- all your attention is on me,” George gets out, the words sticking in his mind for longer than he’d like. He buries his face in his hands, feeling the heat emanating from his cheeks. “This is embarrassing, please--”

Dream laughs now, a small squeak leaving his lips as he covers his eyes as well.

“But did it help?” Dream asks, his voice on a side of genuine that George doesn’t expect.

The fog in George’s mind has subsided somewhat.

Not completely, but-- enough.

“Yeah,” George murmurs begrudgingly. “It did help. A little.”

“Good!” Dream says, suddenly brightening up. “Good.” He pauses, teasing at his lower lip with his teeth-- George tries not to stare *too* much, but when Dream gives George a sardonic wink, he realizes he’s been caught in his tracks. The flush blooms on George’s face again, and he reaches a hand to cover it.

They sit like that, in silence.

George’s mind whirls, still--

*You’re forgetting something, aren’t you?*

Is he?

If he’s forgetting something-- then what?



*It-- it just feels like... sometimes I look around and-- it just feels-- wrong.*

He'd said that, but he's not sure whether he believes it.

"Do you have something on your mind?" Dream asks suddenly. "That's the second time you've zoned out in the past few minutes."

George wonders if he could get away with a cheap lie. Say 'no', he's not thinking about anything-- but Dream would probably see right through him, call him out on it. The weight of his own thoughts presses down on him, boxing him in.

"I guess," George mutters. "Yeah, I've-- I've got something on my mind."

Dream hums, the sound soft and low.

"Mm... do you want to talk about it?" Dream asks.

"... Sure," George says. "I-- I might as well. Tell you, I mean."

"You sure?" Dream says conversationally.

George feels like he's standing on a cliff face, watching the cold water of the sea lash against it. Inviting him to jump into its depths, to succumb to the jagged peaks below. But does he dare to take the plunge? Does he *dare* to cross the boundary?

...

"I guess," George murmurs. "Maybe they'll go away if I talk about them."

"Who?" Dream prompts softly.

George leans his hand on his cheek, trying to find the words.

His mother's face flickers in his vision.

*Hello, dear.*

"My parents," George murmurs.

There's a pause in their conversation.

The padded silence before a clap. The hissing of a firecracker, just before the fuse hits the gunpowder and sets everything ablaze. The space right before a match is thrown onto a pile of kindling, that silence as you watch the match flutter to the base of the pile.

"Just," George says. The match is dropped on the kindling, the edges of the fire starting to crackle and pop. "I don't think-- I've ever really... told anyone-- I've never..." He pauses. "I've never told anyone about them. And... I feel like-- like I should? Maybe it'll-- stop hurting. If I say it."

Dream smiles, a mixture of sympathy and caution.

"If you want to talk about it, then you should," Dream says. "I'm not-- forcing you or anything, I'm just--"

"I-- yeah, I know that," George cuts Dream off before Dream can ramble on. "I know."

He takes a shuddery inhale.

"I just... there's-- there's a lot on my mind," George admits. "I-- when Bad was talking about the famine and the-- and the disease on the cattle, it reminded me of something. A little hazier, in the back of my mind-- just... I didn't always live in Somnium. I think me and my parents-- we lived somewhere nicer? Closer to the center of Fortuna. But--"

*“We have to go,” his father says. “The city isn’t safe , Liz. Not for him. Not for us.”*

*“But uproot this?” his mother asks. “Uproot his life? Where would we go?”*

*George watches from his hiding spot.*

*His parents’ voices are hushed, his mother holding a candle as she presses his father for answers. Her face seems tired, somewhat strained.*

*“Somewhere far,” his father says. “Far away from here.”*

*“Somnium?” his mother blurts out. “Is that why you were looking at those maps-- how long have you had this planned, Henry--”*

*“A while,” his father says evasively. “But George will be safe there. Far away from all of this.”*

*“And you’re sure he will be?” his mother presses, stepping closer to his father.*

*“... Fortuna willing,” his father murmurs.*

Fortuna willing.

“I think there was a plague,” George says falteringly. “I-- my parents never told me what exactly, just... that it was bad. Other people were just-- quarantining, trying to wait out the plague apparently. But my parents-- they didn’t do that. They just... they took everything we could carry and left.”

“Huh,” Dream murmurs. “No, I’d heard of that plague. In the town of Rotam, right? Bad studied that extensively. There didn’t really-- seem to be any cause for it. It’d just come out of nowhere, and it... destroyed that town utterly. It-- even now, I think it’s still suffering. I dunno, just...” He touches the back of his neck sheepishly. “I think your parents made the right choice. To just-- leave.”

George hums.

“I-- I dunno,” George murmurs. “It-- I don’t really... *remember* it. I just remember my parents telling me about it, I guess.”

“What was it like? In Somnium,” Dream asks. “With-- with your parents. I wanna hear about--” he snickers a little. “What was it like being little George?”

“I--” George hums, shooting Dream a somewhat dirty look-- “I’ll get to that. It-- well, it just...” He takes a breath, trying to find the best way to speak. To organize the words floating in his mind, unrestrained and desperate. “I was pretty weak and sickly as a child, really-- I remember mom would always-- she’d always be at my bedside and I remember feeling-- really, really bad about it--”

*His head burns with heat.*

*It’s hard to think. He shifts uncomfortably on the cot, looking at his mother’s concerned face in his hazy vision.*

*“I told you not to go outside in the rain,” his mother scolds gently as she reaches out a cool hand to press against George’s forehead, a faint golden glow dancing on her fingers. George shivers a little as a tingly sensation, like aloe or some kind of cooling balm, spreads on his forehead.*

“Sorry,” George croaks out.

*“It’s not a matter of being sorry, Georgie,” his mother says, her voice softer now. “You’ve only got one life. And I want you to take care of yourself.”*

*The heat haze the fever has him trapped in subsides somewhat as his mother lifts up one of his hands, squeezing it gently. She presses her forehead to his knuckles, softly murmuring,*

*“Fortune rota volvitur.”*

*George isn’t sure what that means.*

*He’s heard it come from his mother’s lips before and heard it come from his father’s.*

*George's fingers begin to glow golden as his mother continues to murmur, and he watches, somewhat entranced as the golden glow spreads through his veins, lighting up his skin. The subtle ache of his bones dissipates somewhat, but it doesn't go away entirely.*

*"George," his mother says. "Watch this."*

*George watches as his mother draws an intricate pattern on her palm, her fingers glittering, shining gold. She takes a breath, her expression focusing a little as the golden glow in her palm becomes brighter. She snaps her fingers. A bright glow emanates from her hand, and she lifts her hand to blow bright golden light towards George's head.*

*He giggles softly, sneezing a little as some of the magic dissipates into shining particles against his skin. The magic coats his skin, and he lifts his hand to find it not as achy as before, flexing his fingers to find his grip stronger than before.*

*"Will you teach me how to do that?" George asks.*

*His mother reaches out to ruffle his hair, her other hand tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear.*

*"One day," she promises. "When you're old enough to do it."*

*"I-I guess I just... I know some of it," George murmurs, looking down at his hand. He can almost feel it, that tingle of magic spreading through his fingertips, pressing it to his mother's chest in a desperate attempt to drown out the poison-- the plague corroding her heart--*

*Dream hums softly.*

*"Your mother sounds like she really cared about you, George," Dream murmurs.*

*George looks back down at his hand again. His fingertips tremble ever so slightly.*

“She did,” George says. The fog in his head rises a little, static clouding at the edges of his vision.

Dream’s hand reaches out to pat George’s shoulder.

“How about you tell me how you learned to spar like that? Back then,” Dream says softly. George looks at Dream’s eyes, warm and reassuring. He swallows the lump in his throat, trying hard not to cry.

“I-- it wasn’t really a big thing,” George murmurs. “I think it was just-- when my dad wasn’t busy, he’d just-- he’d spar with me. Teach me a few maneuvers-- he tried teaching me some combat magic at one point, but I wasn’t getting it, so he-- he kinda gave up on that one.”

*“Left foot, then right,” his father calls to him. “Eyes on me. And then once you’re in range-- strike. ”*

*George grapples with the blunt wooden blade in his grip, turning it back and forth and back and forth.*

*“I’m trying,” he blurts out. “It’s just not working .”*

*His father sighs a little, a reassuring smile crossing his face.*

*“It will,” his father says. “Just give it time. And practice.”*

*“We’ve practiced for so long already,” George whines. “Can’t I just go?”*

*His father’s gaze is unreadable as he lowers his own wooden sword, dangling it at his side.*

*“George,” his father says. “One day-- you’ll have to be on your own.”*

*George stares at the ground, at a tiny little ladybug crawling up a strand of grass.*

*"I know, dad," George mumbles. "We've talked about this before."*

*"That's not my point," his father says patiently, kneeling a little so he's at eye level with George. "My point is that-- this world is dangerous. Your mother and I-- we've tried to keep you safe from it, but we won't be here forever. And when that happens-- maybe- maybe you'll run into things that won't be willing to talk it out with you. That you'll have to fight."*

*George looks at his father, at the roaring fire burning within them.*

*His father has always burned brightly, an intense ember that refuses to be stifled.*

*"Just bear with me a little more," his father says. "And then you can go back to the house. I hear your mother's baking."*

*George brightens a little, and he nods.*

*"Okay," George says. "I'll-- I'll try."*

*"Dad was..." George tries to reel in his mind, tries to take deep breaths in and focus his thoughts so he can get through his story. "It was hard. When he was gone, and then it was just me and mom. And-- and then it--"*

*"You must live."*

*George's sobs tear through his throat as he kneels by his mother's bedside. His mother-- a flickering flame that he can't even protect, can't even wrap his arms around to protect it from the buffeting wind--*

*"But I--"*

*"I ask of you this, my dear," his mother whispers. "At all costs."*

*"Live."*

*He can't even--*

“George!”

George snaps his gaze to Dream, realizing that his knight has his hands wrapped around his own. His hands are trembling, his eyes starting to burn with unshed tears.

“George,” Dream says quietly, his thumb rubbing reassuring circles into George’s hand. “You don’t have to say any of this, you know. Don’t push yourself.”

George takes a shuddery breath, moving one of his hands to brush at his face.

“M fine,” he says wetly. His voice cracks a little, and he cringes a little.

“You don’t *sound* fine,” Dream retorts. He takes a deep breath, relaxing his shoulders. “Alright. How about this-- we take a break today. I’m sure Bad wouldn’t mind, especially after yesterday.”

George nods shakily, still wiping at his tears. He looks down at his clothes, the crumpled king’s uniform-- and feels his stomach turn a little, nausea roiling in his gut.

“I-- do I have to wear this, then?” George tries. He braces himself for Dream to refuse, to remind him that his appearance is still crucial-- but Dream shakes his head.

“If you don’t want to, then don’t,” Dream says. “We’re on break for today.”

George’s heart pounds a little. He nearly feels... touched. Cared for, almost. He nods though, a wave of relief rushing through him before it’s suddenly cut short.

“Wait-- but, my old clothes aren’t,” George’s train of thought stops for a second, and the words slip away. “My-- my old clothes,” he tries, trying to reorient himself. “My old clothes aren’t warm enough for the fall weather. I-- I had something more-- insulating? At my house, I mean-- f-for fall and winter...”



Dream hums.

“Well, I heard it was going to be warm today,” Dream says. “I think I’ll crack open a window and get a feel for the temperature?”

“Go... do that, I guess,” George mumbles as he reaches for his old undershirt. The white cotton feels scratchy against his palms. It feels like home. For some reason, the thought of home doesn’t comfort him as much as it used to, as much as he expects it to. He looks at the old shirt, at the parts where the fabric is so thin he can nearly see his splayed hands through it.

A sudden gust of wind blows through the room, the faint scent of leaf rot and rich earth so powerfully nostalgic. Dream leans across the windowsill, letting the wind twist and tangle his hair, his eyes fluttering shut. George can’t help but watch, can’t help but notice as Dream’s eyes flutter shut and he leans out a little more, languidly, like a cat stretching on a beam of sunlight.

“Mm,” Dream hums a little before he leans back, stretching his arms out a little. “Yeah, I think it’s good. You’ll probably be fine if you just wore the shirt. It’s-- surprisingly warm outside?” Dream scratches at the back of his neck, as if trying to gather his thoughts. “It’ll probably be one of the last warm days before the chill sets in.”

“Hm,” George murmurs, beginning to undo the top buttons of the king’s uniform. “I do like that kind of weather. It’s kind of like-- the sun waving goodbye before it submits to the cold.”

His mother always used to say the world ran on cycles, on wheels-- forever moving forward, each event leading smoothly to another. That it was the people’s responsibility to turn, to replace the spokes and keep that old wheel turning, round and round and round in the end. George remembers always asking his mother, *well, what happens if the wheel goes backwards?*

His mother had giggled softly, and in a conspiratorial whisper, responded, *then maybe, Fortuna will reveal to us something new.*

George shrugs off the king’s uniform, throwing the shirt somewhat haphazardly onto the bed.

He feels prickling eye contact on the back of his neck.

Dream is staring.

As George picks up the white cotton shirt to pull over his head, he becomes painfully aware of Dream's gaze settling somewhere around his collarbones, and then a little--

"Dream," George warns.

Dream jolts a little, a sudden flush flooding his cheeks.

"I was *not* staring," Dream says immediately.

"Sure you weren't," George says wryly as he pulls the shirt over his head. "That's why I didn't say you were."

Dream looks like a fish out of water, desperately attempting to grasp for a reasonable explanation.

"I-- no, yeah, totally, I wasn't looking at how... pale you are," Dream stutters out. "Especially for a guy who-- used to... live on the outskirts of Fortuna--"

"Yeah, mhm. Yup," George says as he ties up his collar, tightening the strings on his shirt. "Sure, Dream."

"I'm being *serious*," Dream says, his tone settling somewhere between exhaustion and pleading. George gives Dream what he hopes is his best unimpressed look, and Dream sighs, running a hand through his hair. "Look, I-- alright. Can we change the subject?"

"I was always down for that," George says as he sits down to zip up his heels. Dream lets out a wheezing exhale of relief as George continues to speak. "So-- what are we doing today?"

"Well," Dream starts conversationally, his voice a touch more even than before. "You know what makes me feel better when I'm feeling down? That is a rhetorical question, by the way-- you don't have to answer it."

George's lips part a little as he tries to think of what to say.

He comes up empty, though, and Dream continues,

“I usually talk to Sapnap-- or any of my other friends. I mean-- you’re one of my friends, too, but... Sapnap’s my rock, y’know? He might... well, maybe he can help you too.”

George shrugs nonchalantly, trying to come off more casual than he really feels. He doesn’t feel-- at all well, really. Not mentally, at least. He doesn’t quite feel like he’s *in* his body, still-- the strange feeling of floating out of it, of watching himself act upon practiced movements-- is disconcerting.

“Sure,” George settles. “I’m down for it. Not like there’s anything better to do.”

Dream smiles broadly, and George almost has the urge to match Dream’s infectious energy. He tries to smile a little, but the strain of attempting to keep the smile on his face is--

Well, the smile drops off his face rather quickly, anyway.

They weave through the castle slowly, almost at a meandering pace. Dream sticks close, never walking too far ahead. It’s almost nice-- George can feel Dream’s warmth emanating from him, pleasant and reassuring and just... *so* Dream.

As they begin to descend lower towards the forge, they catch sight of a familiar shock of black hair.

“Sapnap?” Dream calls from across the hallway.

“*DREAM?*” a familiar voice responds, loud and boisterous.

“Sapn-- *holy shit--!*”

George watches as a blur of color slams into Dream, catapulting him halfway across the hall with a loud *thud*. George warily steps closer, his heart pounding in his ears as he chances a look at what just went down. Sapnap’s arms are latched around Dream’s neck as Dream lays on the floor, spread-eagle.

“Hey, Dreamie,” Sapnap teases. “Long time no *fucking* see, cheater.”

“Sapnap,” Dream groans out. “You need to *stop* using speed spells to ram into me. You’ll actually break something one day.”

“Mm. I considered it,” Sapnap says as he pulls away from Dream, standing up. “Answer’s no.”

“I figured,” Dream says as he pushes himself up from the ground. “Good timing, honestly-- we were looking for you.”

“Oh-ho? Looking for me?” Sapnap says, batting his eyelashes. “*Do* tell me all the juicy details there. What would you need me for?”

“Just to talk, honestly-- I thought His Majesty needed a break,” Dream says conversationally. “From like, royal business in general. What are you doing out of the forge, by the way? I don’t usually see you out and about.”

Sapnap’s dressed more casually, a combination of a cream shirt and dark pants. His shirtsleeves are rolled up high, revealing tanned skin with the subtle burn marks of constantly working at the forge. His hair is tied up, his trademark white bandanna still wrapped around his head.

Sapnap’s gaze shifts to George, his gaze analytical. As if he’s looking straight through George, seeing what makes him tick so he can pull him apart.

George swallows.

“Well,” Sapnap announces. “Callahan’s making muffins today.”

Dream gasps loudly.

“*No* fucking way,” Dream exclaims. “I love Callahan’s muffins.”

“I know you do, idiot— he’s snuck us those muffins ever since we were trainin’ together. Or were you just expositing that for His Majesty?” Sapnap jabs a finger to gesture at George. George shifts

his gaze to Dream, who looks like he's just been dunked in an ice-cold bath.

"What's it to you?" Dream mumbles sheepishly.

"So it is," Sapnap snickers. "I see how it is." Sapnap scratches at the scruff on his jaw, a contemplative hum leaving his lips. "Hey, Dream. Let's do a muffin day picnic."

"Oh, shoot. Really? We haven't done one of those in forever," Dream responds.

"Well," Sapnap says. "I think His Majesty could use it. What do you think, sir? Not tryin' to speak for you or anything, but god— to put it bluntly, you look like shit."

George flushes a little, sharply exhaling.

"I'm— fine with it," George says. "It— it's your tradition, right? You guys can— make the decisions on that front."

"Mm," Sapnap hums, shaking his head a little. "Don't give me that. You're part of the group now, Your Majesty. The Dream Team, perhaps. Your voice matters. You wanna do a picnic?"

George tries to rummage his mind for an answer, assemble the puzzle pieces in his mind and come up with something. His gaze shifts to Dream's, who looks guiltily eager about the suggestion of a picnic. George's resolve steels, if just by a fraction.

"... sure," George agrees. "Why not."

"Cool," Sapnap says casually. "Let's head for the kitchens, yeah? Maybe we can pawn off some other stuff from Callahan and make it a real party."

"Sounds good to me, Pandas," Dream says cheerfully, slinging his arm around Sapnap's shoulder. "Let's go. George, can y— oh fuck."

"DUDE," Sapnap shouts. "That's gotta be some kind of record. You tripped up on this twice last

week—”

“ *Sapnap*—”

“You— call me George?” George blurts out. “When you—”

Dream’s face falls for a second before he shoves Sapnap roughly, the blacksmith devolving into raucous laughter.

“You promised not to say anything,” Dream hisses at Sapnap with mock venom in his voice. “You *promised*.”

Sapnap continues to snicker, wiping at the corner of his eye.

“You have to admit it’s funny,” Sapnap says smugly. “At least just a little. Hey, if Dream can call you George—” Sapnap turns his head to look at George inquisitively, cocking his head. “Could *I* call you George as well? Unless, like, you wanna be addressed with the title n’ all...”

“Oh-- no, you can call me George,” George replies. He notices Sapnap do a small fist pump from the corner of his eye. “I’d prefer it, honestly. I’ve never really liked the honorifics all too much.”

“Hell yeah,” Sapnap cheers. “Honorifics are *dumb* . Anyways, George--” George’s surprised at the wave of relief that washes over him when Sapnap says his name-- but he can’t be bothered to introspect about it. He follows Dream and Sapnap closely as they head towards the kitchen. They converse about nothing in particular-- occasionally, Sapnap makes a loud comment that George can’t really hear, only for Dream to swat at him and Sapnap to laugh even louder.

George feels numb.

It feels like his consciousness has been spread out thin.

The cotton of his old shirt chafes against his skin, just like in the dream. It feels like home-- and yet, to his horror, he finds he can barely even think about what it was like to be back there in his little cottage. He vaguely remembers the clovers, the smell of moss and earth, the feeling of

roughly hewn wood against his fingertips--

*The scent of rot and disease, the flicker of candlelight, the feeling of taut skin against b--*

His mind throbs.

“Y’alright there, George?” George hears Sapnap say. George lifts his head to see Sapnap’s eyes carefully inquisitive. Dream has stopped as well, watching George with some concern in his eyes. George swallows, nodding shakily.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he murmurs.

George catches Dream raising a hand as if to cross the expanse, to press a hand to George’s shoulder or back. Something in George fervently hopes Dream would touch a hand to his face, ground him like he’d done the night before. But he tries to stop that train of thought before it goes off the rails, before it goes in a direction he regrets.

“Well,” Dream says softly. “We’re here now. Do you wanna wait outside of the kitchen or do you wanna come in with us?”

“Uh,” George clears his throat, coughing into his fist. “Um. I-- I’ll come in. With you guys, I guess.”

Sapnap nods.

“Sounds fair. You’ve never been inside the kitchens before, have you?” Sapnap asks curiously. George nods in response, embarrassment sticking somewhere high in his throat. “Well, it’s gonna be chaotic, I can tell you that much. You should probably like-- stick by Dream or something, whatever y’all do together.”

“Sapnap,” Dream says warningly.

“Whaaat?” Sapnap groans, rolling his eyes. “I’m not even trying to imply anything there. You’re just reading far too into my tone and then blaming it on me, asshole.”

“Now that’s just mean,” Dream responds pointedly. He sighs a little, slumping his shoulders. “Alright, whatever. We’re wasting valuable time here-- let’s just go and get some of the muffins from Callahan and like, whatever else he can give us-- and be on our way.”

“... ‘kay,” Sapnap says in a voice that sounds *far* too nefarious for George’s liking.

The kitchens are...

Loud.

In comparison to the forge, they’re about on the same scale-- the kitchens bustle with activity, the clanging and banging of pots and pans, the roar of fire, the mingling savory and sweet scents, the shouting of orders. A faint, yellowish glow illuminates the palace kitchens, giving it a softer feeling. It’s almost comforting. George stays by Dream, following him closely as they weave through the bustling kitchen towards a larger oven.

Eventually, they reach a line of tables bustling with workers plating food; their hands are a flurry of activity, putting rations in baskets, on plates and platters, and sending them out the door with a butler to be delivered. Sapnap leads them further into the kitchen, towards a man with a bright blue bandanna tied around his head.

George figures that the man might be the head chef.

Callahan, was it?

George vaguely remembers that name from the first time he’d entered the dining hall all those days ago.

Callahan is currently gesturing to Ranboo, holding out two muffins to the messenger. Ranboo bows hurriedly, taking the two from the chef’s outstretched hands, shoving a mouthful of one of the muffins into his mouth before he bows shortly, dashing off into a different hallway. Callahan waves a little before turning to a different worker, beginning to signal frantically to them.

“Callahaaaaan!” Sapnap calls amidst the loud din of the kitchen. “Callahan, my man!”



Callahan's gaze turns to fixate on Sarnap, and he immediately brightens up, waving both of his arms wildly. Dream raises a hand to wave as well, and Callahan turns to give Dream the same enthusiastic wave. As soon as Callahan's gaze fixes on George, the chef's expression turns more perplexed, almost shocked before bowing his head politely.

"Callahan, my *man*, " Sarnap says as they approach. "My homie. My bro. You know what day it is, don't you?"

Callahan puts on a contemplative gaze, rubbing his chin. He nods solemnly, reaching for a basket of muffins behind him. The muffins look... really good. George has to begrudgingly admit that they look like works of art-- the finest muffins he's ever seen. Sarnap looks like he's about to drool. Sarnap holds out his hands, and Callahan dramatically sets the basket into Sarnap's outstretched hands.

" *Thank you* ," Sarnap says reverently.

"This is a good day," Dream says almost euphorically as he reaches out to take one of the muffins, tearing off a piece from the top. "Hey, Callahan-- do you have like, anything else you could give us? We're hoping to have a picnic like old times."

Callahan looks contemplative again, turning his head to some of the food stacked behind him. He gestures a little, furrowing his brow before he takes a deep inhale, splaying his hand as his fingertips start to glow.

George watches, suddenly entranced by the glowing letters being traced into the air.

*Feel free to take some of it. Not all of it*, Callahan writes. *Max three of each pastry. That okay?*

"More than okay," Sarnap says. "You're the best, Callahan. Thank you so much."

Callahan presses his palms together, bowing to Sarnap a little before gesturing them to the table stacked with food.

Sarnap grins excitedly, taking some of the buttered rolls and tarts from the neat stacks. He shoves

them haphazardly into a stray wicker basket, already reaching for more as pastries fall into it. George reaches out hesitantly, taking one of the buttered rolls and turning it over in his hands.

It's rose shaped.

He raises it to his mouth, taking a bite of it. It flakes in his mouth, the taste light.

George can't deny that it tastes good, as much as he wants to claim it doesn't.

Dream spins his hand a little, and George watches intently as Dream floats up a teapot and three worn ceramic cups.

"Alright, I think we're good," Dream says. "Sapnap, you ready to go?"

"Yep, just-- hold on." Sapnap reaches out for a basket of apples, balancing one on the precarious pile of pastries. "Alright, there we go. Let's go." Dream nods, and the three begin to trail out of the kitchen carrying their prizes.

"Where are we going?" George gets out through a mouthful of the buttered roll.

"Mm... probably the apple tree," Dream says. "That's where we went before."

"Man-- that brings back memories, doesn't it?" Sapnap says cheerfully, giving Dream a bright smile.

"It does," Dream responds. "It really does. And-- George has seen it too, so I think it'd be a good spot."

"Oh-ho? George's seen the apple tree?" Sapnap asks, raising an eyebrow. "Did you show him, Dream?"

"N-no," George pipes up hesitantly. "I... I went. By myself. After..." *after the portrait fiasco*. It feels like ages ago, a foreign experience. Like the version of him that ran out of the garden on that day wasn't even real, a figment of his imagination. He couldn't even summon the strength to run now, even if he tried. Maybe it's because he's weak, easily frayed—

But he isn't.

Is he?

It's hard to pretend like he's strong— hard to pretend that he can maintain the heavy weight of kingship on his shoulders. It feels like the weight of the world is crushing him till he becomes the finest powder, till he becomes *nothing* .

It's easier to be weak, George thinks.

So that when he breaks against the grain, at least he won't have too much to put back together.

"Ah," Sapnap says. "Well, if it helps at all— I hear the portrait's lovely."

It doesn't help, not really.

"Mm," George says as he takes another mouthful of his buttered roll. "That's nice. I guess."

Sapnap's smile is knowing, like he's seen right through George's flimsy excuse. But he doesn't comment on it, and they keep moving forward.

The wind starts to pick up as they head outside. The sun beams down, its heat warm but not too harsh. It feels cool, but not cold— warm, but not hot. A good day.

A day George *should* enjoy, but finds that he can't really bring himself to.

Not when his mind whirls, not when it feels like every movement he takes is deep underwater, tied down by lead weights.

"The wind is rising!" Sapnap calls.

“And so it is,” Dream says as they head down the field to approach the apple tree. “Feels nice, right, Yo— *George* ?”

George jolts out of his stupor, looking up at Dream’s concerned gaze. Looks at Dream, with the teapot floating next to him and three worn cups in his arms— looks at Dream, with his tousled hair and golden eyes.

Dream is a man that shines golden, burning bright with everything he does.

And George?

George feels like he’s always been pyrite— prone to shattering easily, pretending to be gold when it can never be. Never *will* be.

“George?” Dream murmurs. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” George says softly. “... yeah.” The wind rustles over his hair, cools his skin.

It’s nice.

They settle by the apple tree, Sapnap setting down the basket of pastries on the grass and Dream slowly beginning to pour tea into the three cups. George takes one of the cups once Dream’s done, squeezing the cup between his palms.

Sapnap reaches for the apple, taking a bite out of it.

George takes a sip of his tea.

Dream takes one of Callahan’s muffins, peeling the liner before taking a big bite out of it.

They sit like that in silence, with only the wind as company.

The songbirds have long since gone, choosing to shelter in preparation for the cold weather to come.

“So,” Sapnap says conversationally. “I hear you beat the shit out of Dream at one point, George?”

George chokes mid-sip, and he begins coughing loudly as Dream reaches over to pat George’s back. Sapnap wheezes a little, a gasping chuckle leaving his lips.

“I— how did you hear about that?” George stammers out. Sapnap hums a little, a wide smile growing on his face.

“Let’s just say word travels fast in the palace,” Sapnap says. “We’re all a bunch of gossips. The fact that the king is able to nearly school a knight in sword-fighting is pretty impressive, especially when the king comes from what I’d assume to be the middle of nowhere.”

“I--” George snickers a little, running a hand through his hair. He tries to wear the mask of forced casualty as best as he can-- but it doesn’t quite feel right. “My dad trained me when I was younger. He had this-- claymore, it’s pretty similar to the sword that I used to spar with Dream...”

“Oh?” Dream says. “That sounds cool-- where’d your dad get it?”

“It was a family heirloom,” George explains. “Like, passed down from grandfathers and great-grandfathers, all of that.”

*The silver blade of the claymore, contrasted against the gold of the pommel.*

*“Will I ever be able to use it one day?” George asks.*

*His father scrapes the grindstone against the metal. He lifts it up, inspecting it with a keen eye.*

*The blade is carved with intricate details-- filigree and other carvings that George can’t even remember now. But he’s so sure it’s familiar.*

*“If your mother and I have done our job right,” his father says, “then you’ll never have to.”*

“Oh, my family has something similar,” Dream exclaims. “A shield, actually. I’ve never really used it, but... it’s got a lot of history.”

“Yeah, that mother-of-pearl one, right?” Sapnap chimes in. “With the gold detailing. Your mom was polishing it that one time we visited.”

“Yeah,” Dream says. “I think my mother said it was a gift from Fortuna herself-- but I think that’s bullshit, honestly.” Sapnap reaches out to shove Dream roughly, a laugh leaving his lips.

“You can’t say that about Fortuna,” Sapnap chides.

“I’m just saying,” Dream says in mock defense. “In the mythos, gods don’t really-- they’re not in the interest of making physical manifestations and giving mortals *shit*. And I don’t know if they’re still interested. Fortuna... she’s fickle. Choosy.”

“Fair, I guess,” Sapnap murmurs. “Iunno, man. Fortuna works in weird ways. I don’t wanna randomly assign malice to *luck*, you know what I mean?”

“I guess,” Dream murmurs. He moves to take a sip of his tea.

Silence.

And then Dream chokes, coughing violently.

“Holy shit,” George says as Dream hacks up a tea leaf. “How did *that* happen?”

“Some karma that is, huh,” Sapnap says with a raised eyebrow.

“Shut up,” Dream sputters out as he takes another sip of his tea. “Can’t a man accidentally choke on a tea leaf in *peace* around here--”

“No, not really, especially when it’s you,” Sapnap snickers. He sobers up a little, looking at George. “Hey, do you know where that claymore sword is now? Maybe I could, like-- modify it for you or something. Just in case you do need to use it or something.”

George hums warily.

“It’s probably still at my house,” George says. “And I don’t know if and when I’d be able to go back-- but if I had it, I really don’t think I’d want it modified. Sorry, Sapnap.”

Sapnap shakes his head, waving a hand casually.

“Don’t worry. I get it. It’s a family heirloom-- you probably want that thing preserved,” Sapnap says cheerfully before picking a strawberry off the top of one of the tarts. He rolls up his sleeves a little more, revealing a littering of worn scars across his arms. George frowns a little, pursing his lips.

“Where’d you get those marks from?” George asks, gesturing to Sapnap’s arms.

Sapnap hums as he pops a strawberry into his mouth.

“I got scarred by the fire bees,” Sapnap says casually. “They got me pretty bad when I was younger — now I don’t really care as much.” He inspects his arm, looking at the tiny patches of skin that had healed unevenly. They almost look like stars speckled across his skin.

“Oh my god,” Dream snorts. “Again with the fire bees, dude? Just call them embe--”

“You call them fire bees too?” George’s mouth is slack jawed as he looks at Sapnap. “I- I thought I’d never meet anyone else who *said* that.”

“No fucking way,” Sapnap exclaims, leaning close to George. “No *fucking* way. That’s crazy. Literally— Dream’s always made fun of me for calling them fire bees, always said that nobody in the world called ‘em that— but look who’s the idiot now.”

“I still think it’s weird,” Dream complains. “Embers don’t look anything like bees. Don’t even *act* anything like bees.”

“No, they do,” George protests. “They sting, and that’s enough for me.”

“I agree one hundred percent,” Sapnap says. “They sting, they’re small, and they kinda fly a little. Especially in the forge. It’s annoying and fucking hurts, just like a bee.”

“Alright, alright, don’t get on my case,” Dream whines.

“Fine, fine,” Sapnap says good-naturedly. “You’re still wrong though.”

They eat in silence.

The wind picks up again, causing some of the leaves from the apple tree to peel away, scattered by the gust.

“This is my favorite time of year,” Sapnap says fondly. “The colors of the leaves, the wind, the roasted chestnuts... it’s just too fucking good, you know?” He pauses. “Sorry, I got a little sappy there and realized I had to cut it off.”

“Loser,” Dream teases through a mouthful of muffin. “I’m okay with fall. Not my favorite, but I gotta say I like winter and summer a little better. They’re more absolute. What about you, George?”

“Mm...” George picks at one of his muffins. “If I could see the leaves in their true glory, I might like fall too.”

Beat.

Pause.

“George, you can’t see *color* ?” Sapnap bursts out. “Like— can you see any at all?”



“N-no, wait, hold on—” George starts.

“Wait, does this mean you can’t see the red maple leaves?” Dream exclaims. “Or apples or anything like that?”

“Oh, god, you *poor* buffoon— being unable to see the sunset in its glory must really suck,” Sapnap says dramatically, leaning back against the apple tree. “Or a crackling fire, or a lava seam—”

“Guys,” George says exhaustedly. “I’m— *really* not in the mood.” The conversation’s done much to lift his mental state, but he still finds himself straining to keep his facade up, to maintain an impression of cheerfulness.

Luckily for him, Dream and Sapnap stop rather quickly.

“Alright,” Dream says apologetically. “Sorry. But— I’m still curious; what *can* you see?”

“Blue. Yellow,” George mumbles, feeling a bit of a flush forming on his cheeks. “A lot of yellow. Grey. Black. I dunno.” He takes a bite of his muffin, trying to ignore the fact it sticks like glue to the back of his throat. “I can’t really— well, I can’t really wrap my mind around other colors, you know? I can’t really miss the things I can’t see. You can’t comprehend things you don’t know.”

“... that’s fair,” Sapnap says. “Real deep of you, George.”

George feels the corners of his mouth rise a little, and he shakes his head.

“Thanks,” George murmurs.

Sapnap hums.

Another pause.

“Are you feeling better, George?” Dream asks softly, cutting through the silence.

“I dunno,” George answers honestly. “I don’t— feel much of anything. I think.” He lifts his teacup, finding the liquid having gone cold. As he raises it, he finds— “What the hell?”

“Huh?” Dream pipes up, leaning over to take a glance inside George’s teacup. “Oh, shoot. You’ve got a stem standin’ up in there.”

George looks down at his half-empty teacup, at the little defiant tea stem poking straight up in the liquid.

“Huh,” George says softly. “Weird.”

“I hear that’s a sign of good luck,” Sapnap says. “Maybe Fortuna’s giving you a sign or somethin’.”

“I doubt it,” George murmurs. “Feels like she’s been walloping me over the head. Especially after yesterday.”

“Yesterday, huh? Wasn’t that the whole— meeting with the court?” Sapnap asks.

“Sapnap—” Dream hisses, but Sapnap raises a hand.

George feels static pulling at the edges of his mind, feels like he’s not even his own body for a second. As soon as the words had left Sapnap’s mouth, he’d gone blank.

*Isn’t he just wasting our time?*

“Yeah,” George grits out. “It— it wasn’t—” he laughs a little, in spite of himself. It’s not funny. None of this is funny, and yet he feels like if he doesn’t laugh, doesn’t try to pretend as if this isn’t a big deal, he’ll just be proving that he’s weak. “It wasn’t good! They just— fuck, they—” George raises his hands to wipe at his eyes, already starting to sting. “They just— disregarded everything I- I had to say. About Fortuna’s people. About this— about this kingdom. And now it— it doesn’t even feel like it’s *worth* it.”

“Is that really what you think?”

George lifts his head to see Sapnap’s gaze, impassive and yet so analytical.

“I-I don’t,” George tries.

“I think,” Sapnap interrupts, “that you care a lot. About all of that. About Fortuna as a kingdom. About the people.” He pauses. “Or maybe you care about being taken seriously. I dunno. If I was in your spot— forced into shit I initially didn’t give a rat’s ass about— I probably would’ve said ‘I quit’ as king a bit ago. But you’re still here, aren’t you?”

“I guess,” George says. “I-I just... I don’t know if that *proves* anything. Me being here— I just felt like I *had* to, it’s not really like, out of care, out of this weird savior or martyr complex. I just...”

Just what?

He doesn’t know.

*He doesn’t know.*

“I mean, fair,” Sapnap says. “But I don’t think you should give up. I don’t think you should just throw away whatever plan you were comin’ up with just cause of the dignitaries. And I don’t know the full story, right, but it sounds like it matters to you. Sounds like you at least care about *that*.”

“I—”

*This foolish attempt to appeal to greater morality will get you nowhere.*

“I don’t want to think about it,” George grits out, his eyes starting to sting again.

Sapnap ‘tsk’s, snapping his fingers. Sparks dance across George’s vision, and he watches as Sapnap’s gaze intensifies, sharpens.

“Listen, I get it,” Sapnap says softly. “They made you cry. And that fucking sucks, alright? It sucks that they didn’t listen to you. But-- you’ve gotta admit, don’t you have the urge to prove ‘em wrong? To prove that you’re *better* than the shit they threw at you?”

George doesn’t know.

“I just--” George swallows. “I don’t want to just--”

“Sapnap,” Dream says. “Lay off him.”

“If he wanted me to lay off, he could tell me that himself,” Sapnap responds. “George’s his own person, right?”

Dream looks like he wants to protest, but remains silent.

George swallows a little, tries to think. Tries to pull himself together enough to answer Sapnap, to do *something* -- but he can’t. It’s hard, it feels like he’s going to break-- his seams slowly breaking apart again, slowly fraying open.

“I-I don’t want to just... give up on it,” George admits. “But I-- I’m scared that it’s-- it’s not going to go well.”

“So fucking what if it doesn’t,” Sapnap bites back. “You’re the king. Don’t let people like that tell you what you can or can’t do.”

“It’s not that simple,” George tries. “Really, it--”

“I think it is, maybe,” Sapnap says. “The whole lot of them are cowards. The dignitaries just want to make you someone they can push around-- so *push back*. ”

Is it really that easy?

Maybe it is. Maybe it isn’t.

But George privately admits he really hasn't tried. Out of what? Fear? A desire to preserve his fragile state for as long as he can?

But he's not going to get anywhere if he doesn't take the plunge.

If there's no leap of faith.

The wind starts to pick up again.

The trees start to whistle as the wind passes through them, as leaves are thrown into the air, floating far, far away. George almost wishes that could be him, floating somewhere far, far away--resting somewhere greener, somewhere quiet. Away from all of this.

"The wind is rising," Sapnap murmurs. "And we must try to live, even if it tears us down."

*Even if it tears us down.*

But is George strong enough to pull himself together?

He's not quite sure.

But maybe it'd be worth a try.

## Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading :) i know we haven't updated in a bit but i needed to take a break after speedrunning so many updates  
i hope you liked this chapter, it definitely has a lot in it but i do enjoy it a lot :]

also, george's mom is singing in memoriam by the oh hellos! i definitely do *not* own that

--

songs i listened to while penning this chapter:

- honey whiskey
- faster car
- in memoriam
- wishing well
- bitter water
- monsters calling home vol. 1 (the entire album by run river north)

--

thank you guys for all the support on lucky charm, it's been absolutely phenomenal. let me know what yall think in the comments below and shit!

# Chapter 15

## Chapter Summary

“Yeah,” George says. He steels himself, tries to gather his scattered mind together to speak. “I wanted to talk to you about the... meeting. And what I plan to do from there.”

Niki’s gaze softens a little.

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“I’ll take the plunge,” George says suddenly.

They stand in the middle of a large atrium. The ceilings are arched, running moulds engraved with delicate vines running along the edges of the ceiling. This atrium is slightly different-- the ceilings are painted delicately, decorated with flowers and leaves and greenery of all kinds.

The light filtering in from the window is pale, feeble.

Just as they’d entered the castle last night, the sky immediately started to pour rain. Nothing horribly drastic, but enough that tree leaves started to fall, enough that a wet chill started to creep in. A reminder that the sunny, temperate day was nothing more than temporary. That the old wheel turns around, again and again and again in the end.

The sky today is overcast, the sun barely bleeding through the thick swab of grey clouds.

It’s bitterly cold.

Well, not bitter. But enough that his fingertips are chilled, enough that his nose and ears tingle a bit.

Soon, all the leaves will fall from the trees, and George will have to begrudgingly accept the passage of time once more.

“The plunge?” Dream asks, raising an eyebrow.

“I--” George spreads his hands, gesturing to the room. “I’ll take a leap. Of faith. Of-- I’ll do it. I’ll-- we’re sending out the caravans. With supplies. To the people.” He’ll put his plans into motion-- he’ll move the first pawn across the chessboard and pray he knows the rules enough not to be put in another checkmate.

“You-- you sure?” Dream asks.

“You doubt me?” George responds, raising an eyebrow.

“No, never,” Dream murmurs. “Just... I worry.”

George will admit he’s not all of the way there yet. He doubts there’ll ever be a time where he can put anything into motion with *pure* confidence, believe in himself with pure bravado. But for now, he’ll attempt to manage this. The best he can. Because Sapnap’s right-- the wind rises. Waits for no one.

And he’s-- at least tired of always being blown apart.

So he’s going to act.

“I...” George swallows. “I want to talk to Niki. About this. Maybe hear her opinion.”

“You sure?” Dream repeats. George raises his head to look at Dream’s concerned gaze, at his pursed lips. They’re slightly chapped. George wonders what they would feel like if he ran his fingers across them, pressed his thumb against his lower lip. And then George realizes exactly what he’s thinking.

*What the fuck.*

*What the fuck*, he thinks feverishly as he tucks his arms behind his back in a feeble attempt to restrain the urge to reach out for Dream. His fingers strain with a sensation, with a yearning that he’s not even sure is his own.



What the hell is *wrong with him*? Dream tips his head a little, his lashes fluttering as he blinks.

Dream's--

"You're staring," Dream says softly. "Your Majesty."

George's face grows hot.

"I'm not," George responds, his voice cracking a little. "Don't flatter yourself, Dream."

"Hohh," Dream crows. "Am I really not much to look at, George?"

George turns his head, scanning the empty atrium with a hasty look.

"*Dream*," George breathes out. "You were the one who said we had to be *careful*."

Dream snickers.

It's a warm sound. George's stomach lurches a little, the tips of his fingers almost losing all sense of feeling as he watches Dream.

"I don't feel like being careful," Dream says in a tone that George could almost consider *reverent*.  
"Around you."

George isn't sure what to say to that. What is he *supposed* to say to that-- to words that are so sincere and so *Dream* that it makes him forget how to think? How he's supposed to act? He's *king*, for Fortuna's sake-- and succumbing to fancy, gilded words like some blushing *idiot* isn't the way to go. Can *never* be the way to go.

Maybe it's because he's so raw emotionally right now.

Maybe it's the fact his walls have been lowered to the point where everything is catching him off guard.

"You're such an idiot," is what George says instead. "Where's Niki at, usually? Like around now."

"Hm," Dream says contemplatively, rubbing at his chin. "She should be at her... hm. I remember asking Wilbur about her schedule at one point, before you came. She should be at her garden, I think."

"Niki has a garden?" George asks, raising an eyebrow.

"I-- well, yes and no, kind of?" Dream says, wiggling his hand. "She has a garden, yes-- but I don't think she tends to it? Hbomb-- the royal gardener-- takes care of 'em, usually. He took care of... the garden where the whole... portrait thing was takin' place."

George tries not to dwell on that phantom feeling of panic. It's still *there*, somewhere nestled deep in his chest. A fluttering feeling, the desire to *leave* --

"I see," George murmurs. "Well, alright. Let's just go and find Niki then."

"Whatever you say, Your Majesty," Dream says teasingly. "You're the boss here."

George shakes his head, reaching out to press his hand against Dream's chest and shove him back.

"God, you're so stupid," George mutters.

Dream laughs now, a wheeze leaving his lips as he turns to head for Niki's garden. He gestures George to follow him, and George does, keeping pace.

"You're feeling better," Dream announces. "Definitely."

“How can you tell?” George asks, suddenly surprised.

“Well,” Dream hums. “You called me an idiot. Then you pushed me, and then called me stupid-- you definitely wouldn’t have done *that* yesterday.” He snickers a little, brushing at the corner of his eye. His gaze settles a little, the corners of his eyes crinkling with genuine intent. “That’s me being facetious, obviously-- but you feel... a bit lighter. Or look it, at least.”

George almost feels touched.

Something about the simple way Dream says it-- makes him warm.

“Oh,” George says, slightly dumbstruck.

“Oh,” Dream echoes with a smile.

Niki’s garden is farther in the castle than he expects. They trail, once again, through hallways and corridors that George didn’t even know *existed* . As they draw closer to what George assumes must be the garden, he gets a hint of something citrusy, floral. Geranium, maybe? Geranium, rose, lavender.

It almost smells like home.

Wilbur is standing by the entrance to the garden, arms folded neatly behind his back.

A true demonstration of knightly devotion, George supposes.

What’s strange is that he’s conversing to the open air. It appears to be about nothing in particular, but it’s... still a bit weird.

Wilbur lifts his head once he sees Dream and George approaching, his eyes widening a little before returning to an impassive expression.

“Your Majesty,” Wilbur greets. “Dream.” He bows his head to George before giving Dream a

casual nod. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"His Majesty wants t--" Dream begins speaking, but George raises a hand to silence the knight before he can continue.

"I want to speak with Princess Niki," George says delicately. "Is she in the garden?"

Wilbur's lips part. His Adam's apple bobs a little as he swallows, considering what to say.

"Yes," Wilbur answers evenly. "But Her Grace goes into the garden to be alone. Take her mind off royal matters."

*What a luxury.*

George wants to be bitter, but he supposes he can't *blame* Niki for having an outlet for all of this. He's known enough about royal life to know it's frustrating-- but something in his heart still twists with envy at Wilbur's words.

"This is about what happened at the dignitaries' meeting two days ago," George responds. "And about the policies I wish to pursue. I wish to hear her insight."

Wilbur stares at George, his gaze impassive. George stares back, wills himself not to buckle under the slight pressure. The hair on the back of his neck prickles a little, and he wills himself not to start shaking. Wilbur's gaze shifts upwards a little, fixed on something George can't see. George cranes his head to look and he sees--

A crow?

The crow's eyes are fixated on Wilbur. It cocks his head, *crows* a little.

George wonders where the hell the crow came in from. He figures the crows have more interesting places to be or to pick at. Not the fanciful, sterile palace. But he can't think about that for long.

Wilbur's brow furrows ever so slightly, a 'tsk' leaving his lips as he looks back down at George.

“Fine,” Wilbur says softly, gesturing with his hand towards the garden. “Go on.”

“Thank you,” George answers honestly. Wilbur’s gaze looks somewhat conflicted, still fixated on the crow as George brushes past, stepping out onto the grass. The grass is dewy, somewhat damp. The scents of the flowers around him mingle with the scent of petrichor and damp earth, and for a moment George can almost believe he’s *home* . The scent brings out a painful sense of nostalgia, of *deja vu*-- of *yearning* .

He turns his head to see Dream talking to Wilbur quietly.

For a split second, George almost wants to ask Dream to follow him.

But he resists the urge.

He can do this by himself.

He turns back to head deeper into the garden so that he can find Niki.

The garden is far deeper than he expects, more intricately designed than he ever anticipated. The flowers are beautifully tended to, their petals soft and supple. If the sun was brighter, George is so sure that the leaves would be glistening, a show of *just* how healthy they are. But as it stands, the sun is blanketed out by the grey clouds, and the light is hazy, almost flat.

He hears Niki’s voice before he can see her.

*“I was sleeping in the garden, when I saw you first .”*

George turns past a sweetly scented geranium bush to see Niki standing next to a rosebush, a sketchpad in one hand and a stick of charcoal in the other. Her head is shaded by a tall tree, its branches rustling in the soft breeze. Her hand makes smooth strokes across the paper, roughly marking out the shape of one of the roses. She’s dressed far more casually than he’s ever seen her, her hair done up in a messy ponytail and dressed in a simple shirt and cotton pants.

*“He’d put me deep, deep under ,”* Niki sings as she draws, *“so that he could work. ”*

George wonders how he should approach.

If he *should* interrupt this.

Niki looks... so much more at *ease* .

He watches as Niki sets down the piece of charcoal, pressing her hand flat against the paper. Her fingers glow brightly as she presses her palm against the paper. George hears her mutter a word under her breath, and then the paper gives under her palm. Niki reaches in, *pulls* out--

George's eyes go wide as Niki pulls out a rose from the paper, spinning it in her hand. It's not perfect-- the rose looks flawed, its petals curling in and the stem thin and frail. And yet, Niki holds it up to the faint sun, a proud smile on her face.

"That was cool," George says suddenly as he steps forward, across the expanse to approach Niki.

Niki startles a little, whirling around to face George. Her shocked expression settles into something more kindly, a bit more welcoming.

"Your Majesty," Niki says, curtsying as George draws closer.

George waves a hand, a sheepish laugh leaving his lips.

"No, no need," George says softly. "It's just us."

Niki laughs.

"So it is," Niki says. "Where's your Dream?"

"He's--" George laughs as well, pressing his cheek against his hand. "He's not. Mine or anything. But that's not the point; he's talking to Wilbur."

“Oh?” Niki asks, cocking her head. “Well, that’s nice. I *always* insist Wil needs to talk to more people, but he’s always so shy...”

“I can tell,” George says. “I saw him talking to... a crow?”

Niki gives George a somewhat transfixed look.

“A crow?” Niki asks. “Birds rarely get into the palace...”

“That’s what I thought,” George responds. “But— I really did see one. I swear.”

Niki hums, sounding somewhat unconvinced. She shakes her head, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

“Well, no matter, I suppose,” Niki says airily. “You’re here to see me. That must mean you want to talk to me, right? Not just about Wil talking to-- birds or whatever.”

“Yeah,” George says. He steels himself, tries to gather his scattered mind together to speak. “I wanted to talk to you about the... meeting. And what I plan to do from there.”

Niki’s gaze softens a little.

“About that,” she murmurs. “I’m very sorry, George.”

“Sorry?” George asks. “What for?”

Niki sighs softly, looking up at the overcast sky. The faint light casts hardly any shadow on the ground, and she focuses her gaze back on George, her face remorseful.

“I should have defended you,” Niki says delicately. “Back then, from Minx. But I faltered and I didn’t say anything. And for that I am sorry. I can’t even begin to understand how you must have felt back then-- but you needed support. And I didn’t even raise my voice once.”

She lowers her head, keeping her gaze fixed on the floor.

“There’s no good excuse for my inaction,” she says. “But I truly *am* sorry.”

George doesn’t know how to respond to that.

He’s glad that Niki at least... expresses some sense of remorse.

But there’s no changing it now. No what-ifs about what could have happened. The wheel turns, and it waits for no one. George shakes his head a little, waving his hand. He swallows, trying to bury the rapid lump forming in his throat. He steadies his trembling hands, gives Niki a strained smile.

“It’s alright,” George assures, his voice soft. “It caught us all off guard. But... what happened happened. We can’t change it. Rather, I think-- it would just... be better to move on from it. And see what we can do for Fortuna.”

Niki’s gaze mists over a little, and she raises a hand to brush at the corner of her eye.

“Yes,” she says, her voice a fraction frailer than before. “You’re-- you’re quite right, George.” She takes a breath, steadying herself. “What-- what do you plan to do?”

“I think...” George tries to gather his thoughts a little more. He breathes, steadying his rapidly beating heart before he says, “I’m going forward. With what I pitched at the meeting, I mean.”

“So-- you’re sending--” Niki starts, but George interrupts in a rush.

“Yes, I’ll-- I’m sending the caravans. I don’t want to-- be intimidated by them, the-the dignitaries,” George blurts out. “They just-- for the sake of Fortuna, I-- I’ll go against them. I’m-- *willing* .”

*Fortuna willing.*



As George speaks, he watches as Niki's stare heightens with intensity, her gaze burning with a fire that almost scares him.

"I agree," Niki says, her voice more enthusiastic now. "That's-- a wonderful idea, George. Really." She sets down her sketchbook, taking a step towards the geranium bushes. "The royal dignitaries-- yesterday, some of them invited me over for tea. They spoke at length about *you* . How *refreshing* it was to have a king who cared for the people."

George scoffs mentally, and then claps his hand over his mouth once he registers that he, in fact, made that noise out loud as well.

Niki nods.

"Exactly my reaction," Niki says derisively. "They don't *care* . The dignitaries are just-- hypocrites, plain and simple. They move in the direction of power, but they don't *truly* care. All they have ever done is care about *themselves* . Selfish sycophants, the *lot* of them! They'll agree with your policies while cursing your name the entire time. I saw it on all of their faces-- I couldn't *stand* it."

George watches as Niki thumbs at a geranium leaf, tugging it off and raising it to her nose.

"Which is why you have to act," Niki says after a moment of silence. "I'll support you, George. To the best of my ability." Her eyes are piercing as they meet George's. Desperate and *hungry* .

A hesitant smile quirks onto George's face.

"Thank you," George says gingerly. "It really means a lot."

"Of course," Niki replies. "It's the least I can do for you." She moves back towards the rose bush, picking up her sketchbook. "After all, we have to support each other to the best of our abilities, Fortuna w—"

And then, all of a sudden, there's a loud *crack*.

A deadened branch splits from the tree.

And George, startled by just *how quickly* it happened, watches as it falls right on Niki's head with a loud *thump*.

"Ow," Niki squeaks out as the branch falls onto the ground.

"Are you— are you okay?" George stutters out as Niki rubs at her head, appraising the damage. She winces a little, shrugging.

"Bad luck, I guess," Niki murmurs. "I was going to ask Hbomb to deal with that branch, but I thought that the branch wouldn't have given way this quickly... no matter. I should've expected it — my luck is absolutely *horrible*..."

"Oh, yours too?" George exclaims suddenly. "My luck is— absolutely horrible sometimes too."

He can't even count on his fingers the amount of times something has happened catastrophically due to his bad luck. It's always just been a matter of chance— a casual shrug and a *can't help it, really*.

Niki nods enthusiastically.

"I've always been particularly unlucky— which is rather unfortunate, given I love games of chance," Niki says brightly. "But sometimes things like that tree branch happen and it's just because of some particular unluckiness... well, it can't be helped, I suppose. It's just luck."

"It's just luck," George echoes softly.

They pause for a second.

"Well," Niki opens her mouth to continue, but then they're suddenly interrupted by a loud call.

"*Niki!*"

Niki's head snaps up as she turns in the direction of the call.

Tubbo stumbles in from the castle hallway, holding his hand tightly to his chest.

“Tubbo?” Niki calls. “What’s wrong? *Oh--*”

Tubbo’s clenched hand is bleeding. George sees the dark liquid staining the sides and back of his hand, and he winces a little every time he flexes his fingers out of a strange mixture of desperation and pain.

“What happened?” George calls.

Tubbo’s eyes widen a little as he registers George, and he takes a shaky breath and relaxes his shoulders.

“Uh--” Tubbo holds out his hand, revealing a gash in the center of his palm. George winces a little as he looks at it, and Tubbo jerks his head away in semi-embarrassment. “I... dropped a vase. Cut my hand open. Tommy and I went-- went to Dan to get it patched, and Dan was trying out one of his new poultices and stuff... and said there was a good chance that it could speed up my healing and stuff. And... I reckon I just got the short end of the stick.”

“Oh dear,” Niki frowns. “Was Lizzie not in to help, either?”

“Lizzie’s been out,” Tubbo says. “With Skeppy. Dan and Bad are collaborating, remember? On that outreach project to Rotam.”

“Mm,” Niki hums. “I forgot. Here, let me try...” Niki gestures to Tubbo. “Hold out your hand.”

Tubbo holds out his hand a little further, across the expanse between him and Niki.

Niki cups his hand in one of hers, and her other hand twirls a little as her fingers crook inwards, slowly extending her index and middle fingers as a faint golden glow pulses from Tubbo’s hand, golden vines slowly starting to stitch the gash closed.

Tubbo squeaks a little, nearly jerking his hand away.

“Stay still,” Niki says quietly. “It’s almost done.”

“Stings a little,” Tubbo stammers out as he pulls his hand away. Niki continues to move her hand, and George watches as the golden vines on Tubbo’s hand start to blossom with brilliant golden roses. Tubbo watches, transfixed, as his palm stitches closed, leaving only a pale pink scar. “Oh, wow. You’ve been practicing with that spell?”

Niki nods.

“It’s a *bit* tricky,” Niki murmurs. “But yes, I’ve been practicing.”

George hums a little, tucking his hand against his hip.

“Your magic’s incredible,” George says softly. “Really, it’s cool.”

“Thank you,” Niki replies sincerely. “Anyway, George-- your plan. I suggest that you talk to Scott about inventory and see if he, Shelby, and Puffy can organize a couple caravans. Do you have set locations that you want to send supplies to?”

“I had a few,” George murmurs. “At the time of the meeting. I would’ve suggested them, but--”

“You’re going through with your idea?” Tubbo pipes up.

“Y-yeah,” George replies. “About the caravans. And sending them out in Fortuna.”

Tubbo’s eyes brighten as he bounces a little on the balls of his feet.

“That’s *great*, George!” Tubbo exclaims. “I got really worried during the meeting when you-- you just left. I would’ve talked to you about like-- your plans but I couldn’t find you the other day. I-- I figured that if I couldn’t find you, you probably didn’t want to be found by anyone so I didn’t press it. But I really think it could be the way to go.”

It’s... not that bad, George supposes, to be supported.

To have people that actually believe in him and want to see him succeed.

To have...

Friends, in a way.

Niki and Tubbo are different from Dream.

A *good* kind of different.

George tries to let himself believe in the fact that he deserves support. That this warm feeling in his chest is something he deserves, something that could become more prominent if he let himself loosen up, lowered his walls.

...

Maybe not all the way right now.

But even a little bit is better than nothing, he figures.

“Thank you,” George says gently. “Well, I--” He swallows a little, scratching at the back of his neck with a hand. “I’m going to go see Scott. Where is he usually? I don’t think I’ve actually met him...”

“Oh, he should be at the cellars,” Niki says. “I think. If he’s not there, he’s probably helping Eret with outfits.”

“Helping Eret?” George asks, cocking his head.

“He’s got a bit-- how would you say-- a bit of a penchant for outfit design?” Niki shrugs. “Well, with that being said-- good luck, George. May Fortuna’s wheel look upon you favorably.”

“Fortuna willing, it’ll all work out,” Tubbo chirps. “Good luck, George.”

“... Thank you,” George says softly. His voice is genuine, gentle. He’s surprised by it, honestly. “Fortuna willing, it’ll go well.”

Niki and Tubbo both bow to him and he finds himself returning the gesture before turning and walking out of the garden. He hears Wilbur, Dream, and Tommy loudly conversing about

something-or-other-- he can't quite place it, but as he approaches closer, their conversation grows louder. He hangs close to the entrance, pressed tightly against the wall. Just because he's curious. He's not trying to snoop or anything-- he just... wants to know what they're saying.

"I'm *just saying* , I think we're fucked," Tommy says. "I think we were fucked from the moment the old king took power."

"How are you so sure about that?" Wilbur scoffs. "You weren't even old enough to remember that. The plagues and famines and droughts are a *new development*. "

"Not necessarily," Dream responds warningly. "I looked into Bad's data-- the plagues and famines started in the outer regions of Fortuna, wiping out the smallest towns and villages that nobody would've taken closer glances at. I don't think there's any real rhyme or reason to how this is working-- the plagues don't spread town-to-town and there's no evidence of airborne transmission. It just seems like *bad luck* ."

Tommy snorts.

"Luck? You really think it's *luck* ?" Tommy sneers.

Dream scoffs.

"Show some more respect to your elders, Tommy," Dream retorts.

"Yeah, you should," Wilbur adds. "I think Phil's been too soft with you. That's how you ended up like-- *ow!* "

George hears a loud clanging sound and Wilbur letting out a grunt of pain.

"What is *wrong* with you, child," Wilbur groans.

"Don't fucking insult me," Tommy says. "I'm right. My intuition can't be wrong about this-- I just *know* something's wrong with the way all of this is going about. You really think a few caravans will *fix* this? That a bit of royal support's just gonna-- wipe away the suffering of *thousands*? "

George feels his throat tighten a little as he lets Tommy's words wash over him.

He hears Dream take a few steps.

"His Majesty is doing what he can," Dream says. "What would you have us do? Stand by and do nothing?"

Tommy pauses.

"That's the thing, isn't it?" Tommy says hastily. "I don't know what I'd rather see being done. Don't get your panties in a twist over it, Dream."

Dream scoffs.

"My *panties*," Dream enunciates, "are not in a *twist* over anything. As I've said clearly, His Majesty is doing his *best* with what information and abilities are available to him. And I trust his judgement."

*I trust his judgement.*

George feels his heart beating, hears the *thump-thump-thump* in his ears.

Is his face hot?

"You really like him, don't you, Dream?" Wilbur teases.

"Wha-aat? What does *that* have to do with anything?" Dream responds, his voice sounding flustered.

"Nothing," Wilbur responds innocently. "Just that I've never seen you so willing to do your job. You remember, right, Tommy? He was always slacking off, and now look at him. A proper little knight."

“I’m literally as tall as you are,” Dream complains.

“Nah, I think it’s the savior complex coming in,” Tommy snickers. “Ri-- Dream, hey, hey... put that down, I didn’t mean it--”

George finally chooses to move, stepping towards the exit and crossing the grassy garden floor to the stone floors of the castle.

The conversation peters out right as George sees the three knights crowded in the hallway, Dream holding his sword to Tommy’s neck and Tommy pressed up against the wall with Wilbur standing, his head in his hands.

“Dream,” George starts. “What the *hell* are you doing?”

“Nothing,” Dream casually says at once, sheathing his sword. “Was just--”

“He was going to *kill* me, oh my *god*,” Tommy sputters out as he mock-collapses against the ground. “What a *crazy man*-- ”

“I was *NOT!*” Dream shouts. “God, what the *hell* is wrong with you--”

“Dream,” George says warningly. “ *Dream* .”

Dream’s voice dies down as he turns to look at George, a sheepish look in his eye.

“Down, boy!” Wilbur calls before bursting into giggles. “Dream, he’s got you acting like his little *guard dog*-- ”

“ *Guard dog* ?” Tommy croons. “More like his *lapdog* --”

The two knights burst into laughter, slumped up against the wall. Dream’s gaze turns towards the ground, his fists balled. His face and ears are starting to flush, and George almost thinks it’s adorable.

“That’s enough, you two,” George warns. “Come on, Dream, let’s go.”



Dream nods gratefully, giving Tommy and Wilbur a withering look that sends the two of them spiraling into more laughter. As George and Dream head deeper into the hallways, the sound of Wilbur and Tommy's laughter dies down.

They walk in silence, Dream taking the lead to head back to a more familiar location.

"Where are we going, exactly?" Dream asks suddenly.

"To... the cellars," George says falteringly. "Because that's where Scott is, right?"

"Scott S. Major? Why do you want to see him?" Dream asks, cocking his head to the side. "Wait, don't tell me--"

"Niki suggested that I consult with him about castle inventory," George says. "So that's why we're going."

"Oh-- I was going to say that, actually, but... yeah, she's right. I think it'd probably help, and Scott's definitely the kind of guy who would be on board with the plan," Dream replies. "If all goes well, I think we'd probably be able to send out some of the caravans by tonight."

"If all goes well, I guess," George says. "I wouldn't mind if they get sent out tomorrow, honestly-- we might be cutting it short on time. I don't know how long it takes to stack supplies-- but if it's anything like how I used to, it *does* take awhile."

Dream hums contemplatively.

"Yeah, fair," Dream adds. "Alright. Let's go."

The route to the cellar winds down deeper than George has ever seen.

As they press downwards, the shift in atmosphere is almost jarring.

The chill starts to creep in-- a wet, bone-chilling feeling that clings to George's skin, clamming his palms and the tips of his fingers. The walls are slick with moisture, and George clenches his cape tighter around himself. His teeth start chattering a little, despite himself.

"Cold?" Dream asks softly.

“Kind of,” George mutters. He sniffs a little, his nose feeling a bit stuffed. *I hope I don’t get sick. That would suck.*

The chill creeps into his mind, dulling his senses. He tries not to fall back into his mind, into the worry that nothing’s going to work out-- and his fingers flex a little against the edge of his cape, tugging at the faint golden embroidery with an index nail.

*I’m doing the best I can.*

*I’m doing the best I can, so why doesn’t it feel like enough?*

“It gets like that,” Dream says sympathetically. “You should see the cellars in winter. The water freezes into icicles. It looks really cool.”

“Oh,” George says quietly. “Well, maybe we’ll see it one day.”

As they breach the entrance into the cellars, George is surprised by how *big* it is.

The cellars’ ceilings arch high, supported by stone arches and columns. It’s softly lit by lanterns suspended from the stone ceilings, casting the walls upon walls of barrels and supplies in a golden glow. George and Dream’s shadows are long cast lines against the stone floors, and George thinks he’s going to break his neck with how much he cranes to look.

“So, where’s Scott--” George starts to say before he’s interrupted.

“He~llo, you two chattering lovebirds,” a voice says cheerfully. Dream nearly jumps out of his skin, and George snickers a little as a man holding a lantern comes into view. George figures this must be Scott-- a man with pale blue hair and fair skin, his eyes narrowed with a glint of mischief. “Hello, Dream. And you must be the king. Salutations, Your Majesty. I’m Scott S. Major, though you may call me Scott. ‘M usually in the cellars taking inventory where I can-- and then redistributing those materials as requested.” He punctuates his final sentence with a small bow.

“S-salutations,” George chatters out.

Scott laughs.

“Cold?” Scott asks sympathetically. “This place hardly gets any sunshine-- which is to be expected, of course-- this place is buried *deep* in the earth. I try to keep the place dry, since the wet usually draws in mold... but no matter. You’re here for a reason, so what?”

“I want to talk to you about-- well, there’s a few things, I think. Firstly, how many supplies are in surplus?” George asks.

Scott taps at his chin, snapping his fingers. The undersides of his shoes glow blue as he floats up from the ground, drifting deeper into the cellars to take a look.

“Well...” Scott hums. “A lot of things are in surplus. Wheat. Rice. Oil. Wine.” He taps his chin again. “Why do you ask?”

“Well,” George says. He wills his hands to stop shaking-- it’s only Scott, him, and Dream standing in this room-- so why is he jittery? Why is he *worried* ?

Dream’s hand is on his shoulder. It’s strangely grounding.

George takes another breath, and his hands come to an almost-stop.

“Fortuna’s in famine. And the people are suffering,” George explains quickly. “So-- my plan, it-- it’s to begin helping the people by taking castle surplus and delivering it to them. Organize caravans, get them out there.”

Scott’s eyes widen a little.

“Oh?” Scott asks. “Well, isn’t *that* interesting.”

“Is-is it bad?” George blurts out. He feels his cheeks grow hot as he asks the question, and Scott laughs. Not meanly, but more out of curiosity.

“No, no. Of course it’s not bad,” Scott says as he floats back down. “Just-- have dignitaries agreed to this? This is usually something that the king doesn’t tell lowly inventory-takers like *me* directly.”

“They haven’t,” George says. “But-- this is my own plan. And-- I want to see it put into action. Of my own accord.”

Scott whistles.

“Well, you’ve got some moxie, huh?” Scott says teasingly. “But... hm. Do you have locations? Numbers you could give me for the division of supplies? There’s quite a bit of surplus, but I’m not particularly familiar with the situations of many of the villages in Fortuna.”

“Well,” George starts. “I’ve-- I was originally thinking about delivering supplies to Trivere, Tero-- and the villages surrounding Tero. Are you familiar with those?”

Scott hums.

“Maybe. That includes Trifolium and Quercus, right?” Scott asks.

George nods.

“They’re relatively small,” George adds. “I was researching about-- two days ago. The census taken about a month before the last king perished states about a hundred people per those villages. That’s as much information as I can give to you as of this moment.”

Scott hums again, longer this time.

“Well, it’s better than what I expected,” Scott says. “I can talk to Shelby about portioning out some stock. I’ll probably also have to ask Sam about the state of some of the larger caravans and then talk to Puffy as well-- we’ll need some fine horses to pull these out to the people.”

“You’re not-- against it?” George asks.

Scott snickers.

“Oh, *no*, Your Majesty-- I merely *humored* your plans by telling you what I plan to do to help see this plan through,” Scott quips sarcastically. “But no, I don’t support helping the people. I would, in fact, *actively* enjoy seeing them suffer and starve.” Scott snickers again, hugging his side. “Of course I’m not against this. I’ve spent most of my time underground, yes, but I’m not *dumb* .”

“Oh,” George stutters out. “W-well, that’s-- thank you, Scott. Really.”

“No biggie,” Scott says, waving a hand. “It’s the least I can do for the people. I’ll see what I can do, Your Majesty. D’you have a time limit?”

George shakes his head.

“No,” George murmurs. “Initially, I was thinking we could get things out by tonight-- but I don’t want to push you. Take it at your own pace-- but just know that I would still like to see this carried out.”

Scott tsks.

“Well, that’s no good,” Scott says teasingly. “You oughta be more assertive, Your Majesty. Tell me to get it done *faster* .”

“I-- that-that’s not... really my style,” George says falteringly. “It doesn’t feel right. To boss people around like that.”

Scott gives George an understanding, sympathetic look.

“Well, alright,” Scott says. “Talking to Shelby, Sam, and Puffy probably will take a while. But... I’ll see if I can’t get all the caravans prepared by tomorrow. You have my word, Your Majesty.”

George feels like a great weight has been taken off his shoulders with Scott’s reassurance-- and for once, he allows himself to believe that the puzzle pieces are finally coming together-- that he can see the picture that’s been hovering in his mind, just out of reach. An unattainable prize, suddenly becoming just a little more attainable, more *real* .

“Thank you, Scott,” George says. “I mean it.”

Scott laughs.

“Aw, c’mon. You’ll make me *blush*,” Scott teases. Dream snickers at the comment, covering his mouth with the back of his hand. “Well, off on your way, Your Majesty. I’ve got a lot to do and not a lot of time to get it done.”

“Alright,” Dream says. “Thank you, Scott. We’ll get out of your hair now.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Scott says goodnaturedly. “Get out of here, you two.” He bows to them before turning back to head deeper into the cellar, disappearing behind a stack of barrels.

“Let’s go,” Dream says after a moment of silence, tugging at George’s hand.

George nods, following Dream as they trail out of the cellars.

He doesn’t realize how cold he’s gotten right up until they hit the slightly warmer air on the ground floor of the castle, and his ears start to tingle a little-- the tips of his fingers start itching as warmth floods back into them. He rubs at his arms, trying to alleviate the chill. He sniffs a little in an attempt to clear his nose and get more air.

George looks up at Dream.

Dream looks like he wants to say something, jittering with some kind of excited energy that George can’t seem to identify.

“George,” Dream says suddenly as they enter another hallway. “You *did* it! You’re putting your plan into motion, that’s-- oof--!”

George turns around, smacking his head straight into Dream’s chest with an exhausted sigh.

“I am so fucking tired,” George mumbles out.

He feels Dream’s heart beating, slow and steady.

He feels Dream’s chest, warm and secure as it’s always been.

He feels Dream’s arms wrapping around his shoulders, one of his hands reaching up to stroke at his hair.

“God, George, you’re *freezing*,” Dream says gently.

“You think I was just faking my teeth chattering?” George grumbles.

“Well, no, but--” Dream begins, but George interrupts quickly.

“Just stop talking. I just need to rest for a moment,” George mutters.

“Well... okay,” Dream chuckles softly. “Whatever you want, George.”

“Mm. Whatever I want,” George repeats.

They fall silent after that.

It’s nice.

George feels his ears slowly start to warm up, his hands no longer freezing with cold. His cheeks stop feeling like ice. He rests there, face pressed against Dream’s chest and breathing slowly, his thoughts dying down a little as he lets himself bask in the feeling of being so *close*.

His heart definitely doesn’t flutter when Dream rests his chin against the crown of George’s head and pulls him closer.

He tries to believe that--

After everything that's happened these past few days--

He's earned a moment of silence.

He's earned the chance to just-- *rest* . With Dream.

And, Fortuna willing, things are going to work out.

He's taken the plunge.

He only hopes that at the bottom of the ocean, there are no spikes waiting for him.

## Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading this chapter; hopefully yall enjoyed the more comforting parts of this one :]

and i hope you especially enjoyed seeing niki and tubbo again, niki is the lol /p

--

songs i listened to while penning this chapter

- fireflies

- i see a dreamer

- honey whiskey

- heat waves (sue me)

- tangerine

- hands up

---

Feel free to drop kudos, comments, your thoughts, anything! It really gives me a lot of motivation :]



## Chapter 16

### Chapter Summary

“Oh,” Dream says, taking a cursory glance at the parchment. “That... should be from Phil.”

“Phil?” George asks as he unfolds the parchment. “... Huh. You’re right. He wants to see us as soon as we have time. Which... might as well be now.”

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It’s dark.

Dream finds himself standing alone in a forest. He looks up at the sky, but finds the sky devoid of the moon and the stars. Is he lost?

He doesn’t know.

He snaps his fingers, pulling together enough energy to form a sputtering flame in the palm of his hand. It’s never been as bright as Sappap’s fire. Dream’s never been a fan of aggressive magic— he prefers more... well, passive isn’t really what he means. He just prefers magic that causes less harm— prefers smaller, contained miracles.

Thaumaturgies, perhaps.

*Snap!*

Dream whirls his head to hear the snap of a branch.

He sees a flash of fabric, tugged by the thorny brambles.

A figure.

“Wait!” Dream calls out.

The figure stops suddenly, turning their head to the direction of Dream’s voice.

Dream catches a glimpse of their eye— brilliant and golden. And yet, as soon as they make eye contact—

The figure turns away, rushing through the forest. Their gait is uneven, uncaring as they crash through the forest, with the crunch of the leaves and snapping of the branches.

Dream feels compelled to run.

His step feels lighter as he chases this phantom shadow, chases after a feeling that if he could just get a good look at the figure’s face, everything would be made *clear*. The forest’s darkness makes it hard to catch the figure— but the faintest change in values, the faintest hints of writhing fabric are enough. Sometimes, if Dream’s lucky, he catches a glimpse of the figure’s radiant *gold*.

The forest breaks into a clearing.

The figure stops running suddenly, as if suddenly pulled by an invisible puppeteer.

Dream slides to a halt against the wet grass.

The figure is close enough to touch.

They’re smaller than Dream expects.

*Who is this?*

He doesn’t know. And yet he feels like he *must* , that this person is something he—

He's been...

Chasing?

Searching for?

Something that has always been here, always been out of reach—

The figure suddenly picks up at a run again, and Dream reaches out a hand to grab their cloak and arrest their movement, but—

*There's—*

*There's no one h—*

The cloak falls in his grip, the gold and rushing footsteps disappearing. But not like it melted or slowly evaporated— but rather, like it had never even existed. Dream tries to remember— there was a *person* there! Someone— something was running away from him, urging him to chase on and press forward and find— and yet as he tries to think, tries to remember the gold and the chase and the run he comes up empty. The cloak sinks onto the ground, stained by the dewy grass. Dream's fists ball in the fabric, finding it scratchy and rough yet smooth and silky, like the faintest gossamer mixed with raw, hurting intent.

*Who are you?*

Dream's eyes fly open.

His fists are balled into the sheets, his grip knuckle-white. Beside him, he hears George's breathing, soft and slow and even.

Dream's heart aches.

He lifts up his hand, looking up at it, tilts it so that the filtering sunlight through the window shades his eyes.

*Something's missing.*

This feeling of missing something-- *anything* -- has been building in him for awhile. It creeps in like a growing vine against his heart, strange and unfathomable. It fills his heart with a strange sense of yearning, reminds him that he's--

No.

Incomplete isn't the word he should use.

Because he *isn't* incomplete.

He's as complete as he can be, perfectly at home within the palace, where he belongs.

He knows himself better than anyone.

And he knows that he's *not* incomplete.

So this feeling of missing something--

It's a fluke.

Yes, that's right.

It's just a fluke, just a feeling that needs to be brushed off before he properly begins his day.

Right.

Dream usually wakes up earlier than George on most days. Today's no different, and so he begins the process of buttoning up his shirt and wrapping the basic, thin leather armor around his chest before slipping on the thicker armor on top. He fastens his belt, toeing on his worn leather boots.

The chill is setting in.

His toes are freezing within his socks, his legs burning with a cold that he always forgets the sensation of until it comes back.

*I'm going to have to change into my winter wardrobe pretty soon*, Dream thinks.

Well, maybe the cold will become a more welcome change.

He's not going to hold his breath on it for now though.

He hears a gentle rustling from behind him, and he turns around to find George sitting up in the bed, rubbing sleep from his eyes. George lets out a sleepy exhale, and Dream feels fondness tugging at his heart.

"Good morning," Dream says softly. "George."

When did Dream start saying *George* so often?

He likes saying George's name.

It's comforting.

Like his own desire to reach out for George, to hold him close manifests in constantly saying his name, seeing George respond and knowing that George's eyes and attention are on him-- a selfish mixture of feelings that Dream isn't quite sure how to deal with, but feelings that he finds too comforting to let go of.

“Morning,” George mumbles before his nose scrunches a little-- *that’s cute, too* -- and tucks his legs into his chest. “God, it’s *cold* .”

“Yeah,” Dream murmurs fondly. “I think the chill is really going to be setting in. On the bright side, I hear Eret’s got the fall wardrobes all sorted out, so they should probably have something for you.”

After that sunny picnic with Sapnap, it was like the weather finally remembered its job and blanketed Fortuna back in its regularly scheduled chilly embrace. From the current view from George’s bedroom, Dream can look out and see the red, orange, gold, brown-- the colorful menagerie of brilliant fall colors, of brilliant leaves blown by the wind, scattering them to the heavens.

*Hbomb must find this a pain*, Dream thinks with a snicker.

Well, no matter.

The palace grounds are large, and the leaves falling is inevitable.

“Oh,” George murmurs. “That’s nice.”

George hums a little, puffing out his cheeks as he tries to think.

“Well,” George says. “When’s Eret coming around?”

“Eret should be coming--” Dream’s lips part as there’s a sharp knock on the door. “Nnnnow, I reckon.”

“Your Majesty!” Eret’s voice sounds muffled through the bedroom door. “Are you *decent* ?”

“Whaat?!” George stammers out. “Wait, why wouldn’t I--”

“Well, I thought I’d just ask!” Eret says cheerily. “I *am* allowed in, right?”

“Y-yeah,” George says as he swings his legs off the bed and stretches out his arms. “Come in, Eret.”

Eret pushes open the door, bringing a large rack of clothes in with them. Dream’s always been--stunned-slash-intimidated by just how efficiently Eret works, at how their fingers spin creation so effortlessly. The clothes on the rack are in varying shades of fall colors, red and gold and brown with the cool blue-greens of the original king outfit for small splashes of contrast that tie it all in.

“*Wow*, Eret, you really outdid yourself, huh?” Dream asks teasingly as he steps over to the rack, toying with the edge of one of the capes slung over a hanger.

“Well, what can I say!” Eret says with a smile. “Fall always inspires me. So, Your Majesty--” Eret claps sharply twice, and George’s head snaps to attention. “I’ve got some improvements to make to your original outfit! Well, not that it wasn’t *already* spectacular, but-- with the chill setting in, we’ve gotta make sure you’re nice and warm, right? So, I thought...”

Eret picks up a box from beneath the rack, lifting the lid with deft fingers before throwing the lid somewhere across the room.

Dream cranes his head to take a peek, and his eyes widen a little.

“Gloves?” Dream blurts out.

Eret gives Dream a conspiratorial look.

The gloves are made out of what appears to be a long, dark velvet with golden embroidered trim around the top.

“These are the kinds that go up to your elbow,” Eret explains. “I’ve updated the design for your outfit to be more insulating as it gets colder-- and when winter comes, I’ll probably beef that up a little more-- but for now, you get this.”

George watches the box in Eret’s hands with an apprehensive look.

“Your Majesty, these aren’t gonna bite you,” Eret chides.

George nods, a small laugh leaving his lips.

“No, yeah, I-- I know that,” George says hastily. “Just... I was thinking. I--” George swallows, as if considering what to say next. “Eret. Could you-- make me something more practical to wear? Like-- something that I could... wear if I wanted to be more casual. But still-- recognizable as king, or whatever. I know that I can’t just-- wear my old outfit without-- you know, repercussions, I guess? So--”

Eret’s eyes brighten suddenly.

“Oh, why didn’t you say something earlier? Of course I could do that for you,” Eret exclaims. “Yes, I’ll-- oh, I’ll get started on it after you change. Here, come on--” Eret picks a few more articles from the rack, laying them down on the bed. A cream-colored linen shirt, a thicker blue-green top with dark grey accents, dark grey pants, heeled boots with pale-grey trim, and--

A red cloak.

It’s--

It’s beautiful, genuinely--

And yet it doesn’t feel right.

*The crunch of the grass beneath his feet.*

*Chasing after something.*

“Thank you,” George says softly. “Uh-- can you two give me some privacy?”

“... Yeah, of course,” Dream answers.



“Hey, Dream,” Eret says. “Why don’t you follow me outside? I want to ask you about something.”

*This oughta be good,* Dream thinks.

He doesn’t *really* believe it-- but he might as well humor Eret while George changes. They step outside of the bedroom, and Eret closes the blue door behind them.

“So,” Dream starts. “Why’d you take me outside?”

Eret hums.

“Well--” Eret says. “I was just thinking-- what’s your relationship with His Majesty, honestly?”

Dream’s heart pounds in his ears.

What?

Why would--

*Laugh it off.*

Dream chuckles a little, rubbing at his nose.

“Eret, why would you ask something like that?” Dream asks.

The hallway darkens a little as a dark grey cloud brushes over the sun, like cotton enveloping a dark seed. Eret’s gaze is a strange mixture of emotions-- concern, curiosity, mirthless-- and Dream can’t help but feel a tiny wave of fear and apprehension mixed with irritation.

"I'm just saying," Eret says conversationally. "You-- are dancing on a very dangerous line."

"Am I?" Dream asks innocently.

"You're *hiding* something," Eret accuses. "I see it on your face. And people talk. You forget the walls have eyes and ears, don't you?"

"I--" Dream opens his mouth to spit a retort, but clenches his jaw and keeps quiet. "Eret, why do *you* care?"

"I worry," Eret murmurs. "Because you're the king's knight. And if your relationship with him is compromised-- who knows what will happen? What kind of *ripple effect* does that have if it goes sour?"

Dream knows he's hiding feelings.

He's not--

Well, he *knows* himself. He's not dumb. His feelings are traitorous, a little flower growing in miles upon miles of scorched earth. The first plum blossom blooming in the dead of winter, where no other flower dares to grow. Where every other flower withers to the oncoming cold, the plum blossom hangs on, blooms defiantly in response to all others that dared to hide.

Because it will not be stifled.

Because it will not be burned by the cold.

And it's tearing his heart clean open.

"I-- Eret, please," Dream responds. "Trust me. I have this-- I have this under control. I know what I'm doing."

Does he?

He's held George together before. He's seen a side of him he's so sure George would never have dared to show anyone else-- seen and heard so much of George, watched George crumble before his very eyes and had to hold him together, given George support with as much golden resolve as he possibly could while George desperately tried to pull himself back from his shattered, caustic edges.

He's been as careful as he possibly could be.

Handling something so frail and strong at the same time.

"If you say so," Eret replies quietly. "But-- you know the risks, don't you?"

"Always have," is Dream's reply.

He's been so careful.

His own walls remain firm, resolved.

Even despite the blooming flower in his heart, the traitorous little--

"Alright then," Eret says resolutely. "Well--" Eret raises a hand to knock at the blue bedroom door. "Your Majesty, are you finished changing?"

"Y-yeah," George's voice sounds muffled, somewhat awestruck. "Yeah, I'm good."

"Good! Me and Dream are coming in now," Eret says cheerfully before twisting the doorknob and entering the bedroom.

George looks--

See, that's the thing.

George has always looked-- nice.

Handsome, maybe?

Pretty is another word.

There's always been something about George that pulls Dream towards him, a moth to flickering light, a magnet to a polar center, an electron circling a proton, a comet pulled by a planet. A planet, permanently pulled in by the sun's orbit.

Revolving, never actually touching.

Close enough to be graced by the sun's light, but never close enough to truly touch it.

George's cheeks are flushed a bright pink as he tugs at the cloak with a gloved hand. His lips part a little, and Dream almost wants--

No.

Keep himself in check.

He wants so desperately to draw closer to George and do something he'll regret, do something that he knows will leave him with bruises and burns, but he can't.

At least, not in front of someone else.

"Oh, Your Majesty!" Eret says gleefully. "You look great. I *knew* my design worked really well. How does it feel? Do you feel warm enough? I can adjust it later on if you're not--"

"Huh?" George looks up, gives Eret a sheepish glance. "I-- this feels nice. Kind of. I-- it's different. But it's..." George's expression furrows a little as he tries to gather his words. "Mm. It's nice. I do like it, Eret. Thank you."

"Aww," Eret says, faking a swoon. "You flatter me, Your Majesty. Well, if there's no problems

here-- I'll be on my way. I'll keep your outfit suggestion in mind as well, so expect that in a few days, alright?" Eret breezes past, taking the rack of clothes and pushing it out of the bedroom, disappearing down the hallway in a whirlwind.

Dream can't stop staring at the cloak.

The brilliant red cloak.

Brilliant, brilliant *red* .

Not the cloak in the dream. The nightmare? Well, whatever it was, the cloak he's currently looking at isn't the cloak that he'd been desperately chasing after.

He's not chasing after George.

Why would he, when George is already here—

"You're staring," George murmurs. "What're you looking at?"

"You, I guess," Dream says softly.

George's ears are tinged slightly pink.

"So— so, what do you think? About this," George says gently, doing a tiny little spin. The cloak is long, swishy. It looks soft.

*Fabric, snagging on brambles—*

Dream steps closer, close enough to stroke at the velveteen fabric of George's cloak.

Not scratchy.

Not gossamer, not *hurting*—

“Dream?”

George’s voice is hitched, somewhat hesitant.

Dream’s hand is fisted into the fabric, pulling George close.

“Oh,” Dream says suddenly. “That— that was a mistake. Sorry, I— I wasn’t thinking. Sorry.”

“It-it’s okay,” George murmurs. “But— do you like it?”

Dream swallows a little as he looks at George— at his brown eyes and soft, pink lips and pale skin contrasted with the bright red and dull, dark green and blue. George blinks up at him, his dark lashes fluttering a little, and Dream feels his mouth go dry.

Just how affected *is* he by George?

Just how *drawn in* is he?

A lot more than he’d care to admit.

“I do,” Dream says, his voice hoarse. “I really do.”

George giggles.

The sound sinks somewhere in Dream’s chest, bubbling up like carbonated bubbles in bread dough or in those fizzy drinks that Sapnap always likes. It makes his head pop a little, makes his fingers tingle. Dream’s face flushes just enough for him to feel the heat dancing on his cheekbones, but hopefully not enough for George to notice.

“I’m glad,” George whispers-- it’s... intimate.

*Fortuna.*

He’s-- he’s *glad* ?

It brings up the question, doesn’t it?

Why would George ask?

Why *does* he ask? Continuously?

Dream trails down a line of awareness, tries very hard not to think about the fact that George instinctively reaches for him as well, that George *wants to--*

There’s a pause where they both don’t say anything.

A charged silence, with strange, *smoldering* intent--

“Anyways!” Dream says, dousing the flickering flames with water. George’s eyes are fixated on him, drinking his expression in. “Didn’t Scott say he’d try to get the caravans out by today? Maybe we should-- take a look.”

“Oh!” George’s expression brightens with a strange mixture of apprehension and excitement. “Yeah, that’s-- that’s right. Would Scott still be in the cellars as of now or-- or would he be helping with the supplies?”

“I think... well, maybe we could take a--”

Tap.

Tap.

Tap.

Dream turns towards the door, hearing a stammering voice call out from behind it.

“M-message for the king from Scott S. Major!”

Ranboo.

“Yeah? We’ll be right out, give us a second,” Dream calls back.

“U-uh, okay, sure, but I-I could just read it out to you if you want. I have somewhere to be after this,” Ranboo replies.

Dream turns his gaze to George, who seems a bit contemplative.

“What do you think?” Dream asks.

George hums.

“Read it out,” George says, raising his voice slightly for Ranboo to hear. “Please.”

“A-alright,” Ranboo says before clearing his throat. “ *So, good news! I’ve been able to arrange the caravans. Please meet me at the front of the castle-- I’m sure you’re going to want to see this. Ciao! Scott.* ”

Pause.

“Well, that’s-that’s his message. Um,” there’s a crinkle of paper, and Ranboo paces back and forth, back and forth. The footsteps are loud. “Well, that’s that. Am I dismissed?”

“Yes,” George says. “Dismissed.”



Dream feels a fluttering bit of pride.

George's come a long way.

"Awes-- well, maybe that's the wrong word," Ranboo's mutterings are... not nearly as quiet as he thinks they are. "Um-- it's not as if I don't enjoy sending messages, well-- um... shoot, I guess I'll just... be on my way then." His footsteps disappear off into the distance.

Another pause.

George snickers a little.

"You think that's funny?" Dream says fondly.

"Mm... his dedication is refreshing," George says earnestly.

"I guess," Dream replies.

Pause.

"Well," Dream says. "Do we wanna head to the front of the castle?"

"I think we do," George replies cheerfully. "Let's go."

The path to the front of the castle is full of anticipation. Full of jittering nerves, but not from Dream. It's coming from George, the waves of excitement and nervousness hardly hidden. George toys with his hand, slipping his thumb between his middle and index finger, rubbing his thumb back and forth and back and forth. Bringing his hands together, tapping his left index finger to his right knuckle, a tap-tap-tap.

"Excited?" Dream asks.

“Scared,” George corrects with a laugh. He pauses, his tongue wetting his lips. Dream tries not to focus on it. “But... yeah. Excited. I’m-- looking forward to it.”

“Good,” Dream says with a smile. “Good.”

They enter the main atrium, right at the entrance to the palace.

The castle’s main doors are a bright red.

It contrasts against the pale glow of the rest of the castle.

Dream has always wondered why the castle, in all of its pale glory, would choose to have a door that draws so much attention to itself.

No matter.

“Ready?” Dream asks as he rests a hand against the large doors.

“Sure,” George murmurs. “Let’s just get this over with.”

Dream pushes open the red doors, and there’s a sudden rush of cold wind. George’s eyes squint a little against the breeze as the sun shines down, its glare cold and harsh. There’s a bit of rattling coming from outside, and Dream’s eyes widen when he realizes the commotion.

Several caravans are already packed in front of the castle, with horses tied to the fronts of them. Puffy rushes about, soothing the horses with an idle hand as a few of them jerk a little at their restraints. Shelby is tying some of the canvas coverings down, directing a few helpers to make sure everything’s tied down.

“Punz, can you-- yeah, right there. Move that one in there,” Scott’s voice calls. Scott is floating over the whole procession, his gaze contemplative. “Sam, how’s the load looking?”

“Uhh--!” Sam’s voice echoes a little, and Dream sees a flash of blond hair tinkering with one of the caravan wheels. “The wheels look like they’ll hold. Um, wait-- hold on.” There’s a loud *crack* , and Dream watches as one of the caravans suddenly buckles a little. “Oops.”

“ *Sam* ,” Scott’s voice is plaintive. “ *Be careful.* ”

“You guys, we’re five minutes behind schedule.”

Dream turns his head to see--

Ah, yes. The steward, Fundy.

He’s dressed simply, in a dark vest and white shirt. His shirt is rolled up to his elbows as he scribbles notes onto a notepad.

Fundy’s sharp eyes rake over the procession critically.

“If Sam had executed that spell properly, we probably would've been able to make up for the time-loss, but as it is...” Fundy sighs. “I don’t think it’s going to be feasible that we get these in on time. Scott, didn’t you say the k-- oh, there he is.” Fundy’s gaze shifts to Dream and George. “Hello, Your Majesty. Dream.” He turns to bow to them, his gaze impassive as he meets Dream’s eyes.

Dream nods politely.

Dream still *remembers* Fundy.

Remembers those feelings bubbling in the pit of his stomach, that burning desire and warmth. That willingness to dedicate himself wholly, to do *everything* for him.

But it’d worn away, *frayed* away like holes in thin burlap.

He doesn’t think that way anymore, he thinks.

They'd split, like the fibres of a rope.

Now, Fundy is just someone he sees.

And his own, burning fire of feelings--

It burns for someone else.

His attention-- drawn to George, a magnet drawn to metal, a compass pointing towards a true north. His attention, drawn to George's face, to his wonderment and amazement with the caravans. His attention, so clearly not on the conversation--

"All of this looks great, honestly," George is saying. "I'm so sorry this was on such short notice--"

"It's no trouble," Fundy responds. "Plans of this caliber are no trouble, really."

"Still," George insists. "This is-- really cool."

Fundy laughs.

"Yes, I'm glad," Fundy says cheerfully. "I'm glad you think it is. We're about to go, I think? *Sam!*"

"One moment!" Sam responds. "I've got it."

There's another *clang*, and Dream watches as the caravan straightens up, as if it's languidly stretching.

"Yes!" Sam calls. "Alright, we're good to go."

"Good, good," Fundy mumbles as he checks another thing off his notepad. "You all know where

you're going, right?" Fundy turns to the riders, some of them chatting idly amongst themselves. "Riders, pay attention. Right now."

"Sorry, sorry," a voice says cheerfully. Dream recognizes Jack almost immediately-- Jack Manifold, a brightly energetic boy about Tommy and Tubbo's age with red and blue glasses. "Just got really invested in tellin' this *story* , Fundy--"

"I do *not* need to hear it," Fundy says immediately. "I'm giving *orders* ."

"Boo," Jack sighs. "You're no fun. But, what were you plannin' on saying?"

"I was *planning* on asking you all if you knew where you were *going* ," Fundy says tiredly. "You have your directives. Make sure you get these supplies to the people. And don't dawdle."

"Aye-aye, Fundy!" Jack salutes. Some of the other riders follow suit, their salutes looking more facetious than anything. "Fortuna willing, this all goes well."

"Fortuna willing," Fundy responds, clapping his hands together. "Alright, be on your way."

The whirlwind of activity heightens again, riders mounting their horses before descending down the castle paths, becoming small dots in the distance. When the activity dies down, Sam, Fundy, Shelby, Puffy, and Scott are the only ones remaining. Dream watches George's expression, at his wonderment.

He seems overwhelmed, but--

Dream isn't worried, almost.

He knows that George is overwhelmed in a good way-- excited and apprehensive about what's to come.

*George deserves it* , Dream thinks. Deserves to feel this elation, the feeling of excitement that borders on too little and too much.

“Thank you so much for this,” George says, his voice pitching higher with excitement. “Really, this-- *seeing* this has been amazing. And-- I’m not trying to get my hopes about all of this, but I hope it goes well, really--”

“Nonsense, Your Majesty,” Scott replies. “I’m sure the people will appreciate this. Really-- I think we’d all forgotten what it was like for a king to really pull his own weight. This was-- a welcome change. Right?” Scott turns to the others to various nods and murmurs of assent.

“This was fun!” Shelby says emphatically. “Really. Even if this doesn’t turn out-- I wouldn’t be averse to organizing things like this again.”

“Oh,” George says, his voice sounding a touch relieved. “Well, that’s-- that’s good. Thank you, again, really. I’ll... I’ll keep it in mind.”

“Alright, alright,” Fundy says. “While all of this is good and well, we all have places to be, right? Let’s not waste anymore time. It was nice seeing you, Your Majesty!” Fundy bows, bustling back into the palace. Shelby and Scott follow suit, giving casual bows and goodbyes.

Sam waves as well, heading in the direction of the forges.

Dream remembers that Sam frequently commissions things from Ponk, a grin growing on his face at the thought of what odd request he must have now.

Puffy bows to Dream and George, a smile on her face.

“Let me know if you need horses again, like last time,” Puffy says with a smile. “I’m sorry about Spirit, by the way-- they’re much more behaved, usually. I can’t believe they bucked you *off*, Dream!”

“Well--” Dream tries. “Maybe-- maybe they were in a bad mood?”

George snickers a little. Dream shoots George a look, only for George to stifle a snort.

Dream can’t find it in himself to be mad at George, not truly.

“Why are you trying to ask about the horse’s emotions, huh?” George teases. “Trying to be a horse whisperer? Get all tuned in with them, sing kumbaya, that kind of thing?”

“And what if I *was* , George?” Dream teases.

“Well, uh, I’d have to say, well...” George hums nervously, seemingly grasping at straws for an answer. “Well, I-- would have nothing good to say to that.”

“Aww,” Puffy coos. “You guys are *such* good friends, aren’t you?”

“Uh, well,” Dream starts at the exact same time George says,

“We’re--”

They both pause.

Out of the corner of Dream’s eye, he sees George fumbling with the edge of his cloak, a pink flush forming on his cheeks. He’s not sure what kind of expression he’s making, but he laughs nervously, rubbing at the back of his neck.

“We’re... close,” Dream answers awkwardly.

Puffy smiles knowingly.

“Hm!” She says. “Well... alright. If you *say* so, I suppose. Well, I’ll be off now. See ya!” She bows nonchalantly before running off in the direction of the fields, leaving Dream and George alone in the front of the palace.

Dream tips his head up.

The clouds are darker today.

The wind is more bitter, stinging at his cheeks and his ears. If he was any keener, he could probably smell the rain on the wind, the hint that the weather will only take a turn for the worst as it does around this time of year. That the next coming days will bring a rain so tumultuous it will shake all the leaves from the trees, readying Fortuna for the cold front of winter.

“So,” George murmurs. “What do we do now? Looks like we just have the whole day to ourselves.”

“So it would seem,” Dream hums. “Hmm, I th—”

A black bird suddenly swoops down from the skies, diving down close to Dream and George.

It’s a crow with a speckled white diamond pattern on its wings. In its beak is a tightly clenched roll of parchment— and Dream feels like he recognizes it. The crow, the parchment— the setup of all of this.

Phil doesn’t usually send human messengers.

He usually sends this exact crow, with the speckled pattern on its wings--

The crow flutters onto George’s forearm, nudging the parchment into his palm.

“Huh?” George murmurs quietly as he wrestles the parchment from the crow’s beak. “Who’s this from, Drea-- ah!” The crow suddenly takes off, flying sharply into the air. “That-- that scared me, *jeez* --”

“Oh,” Dream says, taking a cursory glance at the parchment. “That... should be from Phil.”

“Phil?” George asks as he unfolds the parchment. “... Huh. You’re right. He wants to see us as soon as we have time. Which... might as well be now.”

“Mm... fair, yeah,” Dream says. “C’mon, let’s get going.” He turns to head back into the castle, craning his head to check that George is following behind. He’s not quite sure why he does-- George has always caught up to him, especially these days-- but he makes sure to wait.

To make *sure* .



Like Orpheus still so unsure Eurydice is following behind.

Except his Eurydice, George-- *his...?* -- won't disappear.

The walk to the observatory is comfortably silent, both of them keeping pace with each other.

Dream wishes he could hold George's hand.

George's hand, small in his--

Their fingers intertwining, interlocking--

Dream's so lost in his own thoughts and longing to the point he doesn't notice the fact that they've arrived at the highest point of the castle, the short walk outside on the battlements as it leads up to the tower.

"Do you think Phil's busy?" George asks as he pushes open the grandiose door to the observatory.

"Probably," Dream murmurs. "When I visited him before on Techno's orders, he was always nose-deep in a book or something. He might've squeezed us in on his schedule, though? I'm not sure... with Phil it always seems like we're running on his clock."

Phil carries an air of mystery about him— half of it purposeful, the other half surely unintended. He speaks cryptically at best, barely clear at worst. His speech is littered with rhymes, riddles, in double entendre that Dream is sure means something deep and profound, if he *didn't* have better things to do than listen to Phil.

"Fair," George responds. Dream watches as George begins to ascend the rickety staircase of the observatory, trailing behind him once he's cleared the first couple of steps. Out of the corner of his ear, he hears a loud crashing noise and a sudden *spike* of magical energy— it courses through his veins, every hair on his body standing up.

Dream steps forward, pushing George behind him a little.

“What--” George hisses out. Dream presses a finger to his lips, a *shhh* leaving his mouth.

“There’s a *lot* of magical energy,” Dream whispers. “It might be dangerous. Also, didn’t you notice that Phil’s room is darkened? This might actually be bad.”

“I-- no, I didn’t notice,” George responds, his voice somewhat miffed. “I’m-- am I really supposed to be looking out for all of that when I have you?”

“I-- I mean,” Dream stammers, a snicker following, “I guess you’re right. That’s not on *your* paygrade.”

“Damn straight,” George grumbles.

Dream wonders when George got so much sassier.

“*Techno! Stop bullyin’ Wil,*” Dream hears Phil say. His voice sounds muffled, almost like he’s talking into a metal pail.

Phil sounds... younger.

“*Daaaad!*”

That’s Wilbur.

Also sounding much younger.

“*I’m not bullyin’ him!*”

Techno.

*“Well, I come in to drop off some books and I see you’re pullin’ him up by his hair, Techno-- I mean, ha, what else am I s’posed to take that as?”* Phil’s voice sounds cheery, almost amused.

Dream ushers George forward a little, but he sneaks a glance into the room first.

The room is darkened, the domed ceiling reflecting the night sky. The night sky is tranquil, beautiful. All light has been pulled towards the center of the room, where Phil stands. Phil’s right hand is pressed to his temple, his eyes gently shut as his left hand twirls as if adjusting the lens of a telescope. A memory of a much younger Technoblade and Wilbur flickers, a hazy and unclear image. It looks like a smeared watercolor painting, shifting hazily between undefined phases.

Dream spots Ranboo sitting primly on a chair, watching Phil manipulate and tug at what appears to be one of his own memories. Ranboo seems to be getting around quite a lot these days. First in the kitchen, and now in the observatory.

Somehow, Dream feels somewhat... unsettled by the display Phil is putting on. He’s never been a big fan of memory magic— something about it, about the pulling and tugging of the mind— doesn’t sit right with him.

*“I wasn’t bullyin’ him, ”* Techno says petulantly, turning away from Wilbur.

*“Dad, he was! He really was, he was pulling on my hair and it hurt-- ”* Wilbur blurts out immediately, stomping his foot.

*“I know, I know, Wil-- you don’t need to shout,”* Phil’s voice sounds bemused still.

*“S-so, is he getting in trouble?”* Wilbur asks.

*“No, no,”* Phil says. *“You two are young. ‘M not punishin’ him for that. Just remember, alright-- you two are brothers . You shouldn’t fight.”*

*“Okay,”* Wilbur says, pouting a little. *“I guess.”*

*“Say sorry to your brother, Techno,”* Phil says patiently.

Techno looks like he grapples a bit, but unwillingly he shrugs and looks down at the ground, kicking at it slightly with his shoe.

“*Sorry*,” Techno says. “*Wil*.”

Phil opens his eyes, and suddenly the room starts to lighten-- the sun peeks from behind the moon, overpowering it entirely and lighting up the domed roof. The light's not particularly bright, especially as the sky is swathed with dark clouds-- but it's bright enough that Dream squints a little against the thin blades of the sun, stabbing into his corneas. The memory flickers, disappearing altogether as Phil pulls his hand back, tucking it against his cloak.

“And that's how it's done,” Phil says to Ranboo. “I figured I oughta show you a practical application of it since you asked.”

Ranboo nods gratefully, the corners of his eyes crinkling a little. Dream can't see Ranboo's expression from behind his mask, but he figures Ranboo is smiling somewhat sheepishly.

“Thank you, Phil,” Ranboo says. “I appreciate you taking time out of your day to teach me the spell. I dunno how I'm gonna justify it, though-- Fundy always gets on my case when I'm not being productive...”

Phil chuckles warmly, reaching a hand to tousle Ranboo's hair roughly.

“Come now, don't tell me you're scared of *Fundy*,” Phil teases. “Tell you what— if he does get on your case, send 'im to me. I'll say somethin' like— I was helpin' you with memory or somethin' like that. ‘It'd be easier to carry around the verbal messages in your brain rather than on paper’ type'a shit, I dunno.”

Ranboo brightens up considerably, nodding.

“Y-yeah! That sounds like it could work. Thank you, Phil, really.”

“No problem, kid. Be on your way,” Phil says pleasantly. “I've got an important meetin' with the king.”

“The king?” Ranboo stammers, jolting up. George nearly snickers a little, though a hasty glance

from Dream shuts him up. “Oh! Well, I— I-I won’t waste any more of your time, Phil.” Ranboo gets up to leave, and then immediately makes eye contact with George. “Oh my goodness, that— well, h-hello, Your Majesty, it— funny seeing you again, ha-- I really didn’t expect to see--”

George raises a hand.

“It-it’s fine, Ranboo. Be on your way,” George says softly.

“W-wait, how much did— how much did you,” Ranboo tries.

“Enough,” Dream says. “I think we were here for nearly that whole demonstration— *very* cool, by the way, Phil.”

Phil chuckles.

“Thank you, Dream,” Phil says kindly. “It’s a very simple memory spell. I could teach you as well if you’d like.”

Dream hums.

He doubts he’ll ever *want* to learn it, but best to humor Phil nonetheless.

“Mm, I’ll... have to take you up on that offer one day, Phil. Not today, though,” Dream says. “Ranboo, you’re still here. Thought you might want to know that.”

Dream stares slightly upwards at Ranboo, who’s been standing awkwardly wedged between a pile of books and a simple desk. Maybe he’s forgotten he’s still here, a physical presence— but Dream can’t be bothered to wonder about that. For now, Ranboo’s not allowed to be here.

Ranboo startles.

“Oh!” Ranboo says suddenly. “Yes— sorry, my apologies. Have a nice day— Y-Your Majesty. Sirs.” He bows his head shortly before exiting the office.

“So,” George starts as soon as Ranboo’s out of the room. “What did you call us here for?”

Phil hums.

“I hear you’ve been enforcin’ your policies,” Phil says lightly. “Puffy asked me for a speed spell that would work on the horses and I obliged her, of course— but that *did* get me thinkin’.”

“Thinking?” Dream asks.

Phil hums.

“Mm, yea,” Phil says. “I’ve got a few things I want you t’consider, ‘specially about the extent to which we can help the people. I’ll probably just need to fetch the books in question first. It... might take awhile, so I apologize for makin’ you come all this way only to wait... but if you wouldn’t mind bearin’ with me for a second, I can go get the books.”

“No worries,” George says hesitantly. “It’s not like we’re doing anything else-- right, Dream?” George looks up at Dream for confirmation, and he nods.

“Yeah, no, there’s nothing. We just needed to take a look at the caravans and stuff-- and that’s already happened, so the rest of the schedule is looking clear.”

Phil smiles warmly.

“Good! Good. Now, if you’ll excuse me for a second--” Phil brushes past them, exiting the observatory’s top floor and descending the rickety staircase.

It leaves him and George alone.

George fiddles with the edge of his cloak.

Dream listens to the faint ticking of one of Phil's grandfather clocks. His eyes flit up to the stormy sky, still a bit overcast.

George coughs into his fist.

Dream adjusts his collar absently.

The silence is weighty.

It's so silent that Dream can hear George's breathing, somewhat slow. Could probably hear George's heart, beating and defiant. Dream can hear his own heartbeat, the faint thrumming in his eardrums and his neck.

It can't have been longer than a minute, and yet it feels like an hour.

*Does he notice my silence?*

Oh, he hopes George doesn't think he's weird.

He hopes George isn't noticing how jittery he is, doesn't see the flower blooming in his heart. Because he's not quite sure whether George would crush it, whether he would encourage its growth.

*Does Phil still have--*

*Ah .*

His eyes cast about the room, and he suddenly catches sight of--

"Hey, George," Dream says into the silence.

“Yes, Dream?” George’s voice is quiet, contemplative.

“... Shall we dance?” Dream asks, looking down and giving George a mischievous grin.

George blinks.

“I-- I don’t dance,” George responds, words tumbling from his mouth from nerves. “And-and are you sure? Here? There’s not-- much room, and I thought that like, royal dance shit happens in... far bigger spaces than this--”

“Nonsense,” Dream says, waving a hand. “I’m sure you can dance. And if you *can’t* -- the steps are easy. We could just waltz. That’s nothing fancy.”

“But there’s-- there’s no music? Surely we can’t dance when there’s no music,” George stammers.

“Hm,” Dream hums. “I’m sure *that* could be fixed. Phil’s got a small setup in here for-- yeah, there. Look.” He gestures over to a small corner of Phil’s observatory-- a small violin, viola, cello-- several string instruments with a small percussion setup as well. “I could just--”

Dream raises his hands.

He sweeps his right hand down vertically, out to the side, and then back up in a lopsided triangle--

He feels the slight tingle of magic in his fingertips, a golden pull as he visualizes the staff for the song he wants to play in his head. The notes come to him all at once, and he pushes the magic outwards, expanding out of his hand in a burst of golden light.

The string instruments lift up, starting in a soft *piano*. The notes plucked gently, a soft staccato layered with the melody creeping in, gentle phrases of hesitance.

*This song brings back memories.*

Memories of learning it, of remembering how to play it so he could--



“Where did you learn how to do this?” George asks, his voice entranced.

Dream laughs, lowering his hands.

“It’s-- it’s kind of a long story,” Dream murmurs.

*I learned to play this for someone else*, is what Dream could’ve said if he was any other man, if he wasn’t scared George would look at him differently. *I learned to play this when I thought he was the beat of my heart.*

*And it turns out he wasn’t.*

Dream lifts up his hands, crooks his fingers as he focuses on the hazy sun on the ceiling, pulling it down as he raises the moon, darkens the room so that it’s just the night sky, him, and George. The faint golden glow of the instruments is the only illumination aside from the night sky, a faint silvery spotlight casting its gleam onto them.

Dream turns back around, holds out his hand.

“Shall we dance, my king?” Dream says softly. He’s surprised at himself, at his *boldness* -- and yet it sits right with him. Rests somewhere comfortably in his chest, natural.

“I don’t even know the steps,” George whispers. “And you still want--”

“Well, that’s half the fun, isn’t it?” Dream suggests, wiggling his fingers. He wants George to take the leap of faith, to cross the boundary. “Take my hand.”

George looks at him apprehensively, even as the music swells.

“Just for a bit,” Dream tries. “Try it.”

George sighs.

“Fine,” George mutters. “You win.”

Dream tries not to feel triumph at George’s admission.

George reaches out his hand, intertwines it with Dream’s.

His hand is warm.

So warm-- warmer than it honestly should be when it’s so cold. Maybe it’s because of the gloves. Or maybe it’s because Dream is projecting that kind of warmth on him, that kind of comfort-- because he reaches out for George, reaches for his security like the warmth of a flame.

“Where does my-- other hand, go,” George murmurs falteringly.

“Waist,” Dream instructs gently.

George’s face flushes a little.

*That’s cute.*

“Are you scared?” Dream teases.

“Like *hell*,” George bites. “S’just a dance.”

George’s hand rests on Dream’s waist, his fingertips barely pressing into his skin.

Even though Dream’s armor separates the touch, he can still feel it.

Gentle.

Dream reaches out his other hand, sets it on George's shoulder. Just like he's always done before, except now it's different. Now he can so clearly see George's eyes widen a little, his body relaxing and pressing into Dream's touch, pressing closer as if he wants more of it. As if it's not enough, as if it's *too much*.

"What now?" George asks.

"Alright, uh--" Dream takes charge, settling his hand into a more relaxed position on George's hip. "Put your hand up, like that— yeah." George's hand settles now back on Dream's shoulder, his fingers digging in almost sharply. "Stop squeezin' so hard."

"Sorry," George stammers.

"It's nothing to be sorry for," Dream chides. "Just good etiquette, really. Alright, so. What do you want to dance, really? I know I suggested a waltz, but we *could* just slow dance or something, probably couldn't do tango or anything with this music, but up to you."

"Mmm... I hear waltzes are easier to fuck up," George says smartly.

"That's true," Dream laughs. "So, basic slow dance to a waltz tempo, how about?"

George nods hesitantly.

"Sure," George says. "Alright."

Dream shifts his foot a little, taking a step.

George nearly stumbles a little, bumping into Dream's chest, and he squeaks a little.

*God.*

“Follow my lead,” Dream advises. “Slowly.”

“Tryin’,” George pouts.

“*George*, you’re literally standing still,” Dream whines, tugging his arms lightly to prove his point. “You’re not tryin’ at all.”

“Fine, *fine*,” George mumbles. “I just— I dunno how to do this. I’m gonna embarrass myself and you’re just gonna make fun of me.”

“I would *never*,” Dream says in mock offense. “Not unless it was *really* bad, at least.” An impish smile spreads slowly across his face.

“Well *that’s* reassuring,” George scoffs.

“Come on, pleaaase, Georgie?” Dream whines again. “Just, look. Mirror me, alright? Like this.” Dream takes a step back, and he watches as George hesitates before taking a step forward, closer.

“See? You’ve got it,” Dream assures gently, repeating the motions over and over, again and again until he feels George’s hesitance melt away a tad. They move ever so gently, back and forth and back and forth. *One, two, three. One, two, three. One--* “Just like that, yeah. What do you think?”

George laughs breathlessly.

“Not bad,” George admits. “I guess. I know a few-- less regal dances, but... this really isn’t bad at all.”

“Thought so,” Dream says triumphantly, a smile on his face.

George’s eyes meet Dream’s as the music swells again, staccatos bouncing gently, weightless and floaty. Contrasting their even stride, the shuffling of their feet against the wooden ground. Dream’s heart pounds in his chest, faster than the slow thrum of the strings.

He wants to be closer.

He's already close enough to where he can see just how smooth George's skin is, see the slightest *hint* of stubble on George's jaw and every nonexistent pore on his skin, see his brown eyes reflecting the stars from the domed roof and the faintest hint of golden light from the instruments still playing, see his lips, pink and petal-soft--

It's not enough.

George isn't *close* enough.

He wants to bring George's face to his, cup his chin and just--

*Take.*

George's face flushes brightly, as if sensing Dream's intent.

"Dream," George whispers.

If Dream was any less selfish a man, he would've stomped these thoughts out of his head, putting out the flames threatening to light a forest fire in his heart.

But he can't pretend to be something he's not.

So he *yearns* , desperately.

And *prays* , *hopes upon hopes* that George feels the same way.

"George," Dream responds, just as quiet.

The music almost fades as George shifts a little, tugging at Dream's hand.

“You said you wanted to dance,” George prompts softly. “So take the lead, idiot.”

“Bold now, aren’t we,” Dream murmurs.

“Maybe,” George replies. “But you said it yourself. You don’t feel like being careful around me.”

Dream shifts his feet to the left.

George follows now, moving with Dream.

“Maybe *I* don’t want to be careful around *you*,” George breathes.

Dream laughs again, his voice hoarse.

“*George*,” Dream whispers.

George’s only response is a coy smile, an expression that steals Dream’s breath away.

Their steps are quicker now, George matching Dream’s steps as they dance to the gentle, swooping beat of the strings. The music croons ever so slightly, the gentle phrases bleeding into each other as they slowly shift from their position in the room.

*One, two, three.*

*One, two, three.*

He swears the beating of his heart synched with the tempo of their steps.

He wonders if George can feel his doing the same.

They glide around gently like that for a while, pacing in small, steady circles to the beat of the music.

Dream notices George is still hesitant to move too much, that he's more or less been stationary in the same spot-- just shuffling his feet and turning as Dream revolves around him with more lead.

He supposes this really *is* a celestial relationship, far more literally than he'd hoped. How George is his sun, the center of his attention, drawing him in and *luring* his affection-- but only ever *always* leaving burns, damaging him. Permanent reminders of his cowardice.

How he's too scared to give himself fully, no matter how painfully he yearns to.

How he knows, deep down, that he can't be the one to ruin this.

How Dream is a planet, steady and protecting, destined to gravitate around and around the sun-- around and around since the universe came to, a story written in the stars that they can't resist.

But Dream's always been one for dramatics, he enjoys the idea that this is his destiny, that his life's purpose is to be here, solid in George's arms. That George's purpose is identical, that no matter what he may have done, they both would have ended up together like this.

He knows that can't be it, though-- he knows destiny is nothing but contrived nonsense for hopeless idiots, and he needs to stay more literal, more real. Stay in the moment, avoid letting himself dive in head-first and create a collision.

Because a planet colliding with the sun creates a black hole, unassuming and catastrophic-- and he can't risk this gentle, preserved universe just because of a sudden increase in force, a sudden pull from the center of the world drawing him in ever closer.

So for now, he'll stare from a distance, look into the face of the person he has to keep at an arm's length-- no matter how much it may ache.

George's eyes burn bright, boring into Dream's very being as he sees him, *looks* right through--

For a second, Dream thinks George can see it, that flickering flame of desire and want and *dedication*--

Dream pulls George out of the spin, his hand moving to cup George's lower back, supporting him as they press so closely together, bodies pressing together, match against the rough, phosphorous threatening to blow--

George's lips part, a shaky breath leaving his lips.

It sparks something in Dream's mind.

*Be careful, be careful, be careful*, his mind repeats like a mantra.

He wills himself to shut up, throw caution to the wind, just *take, take, take* and not worry about the consequences--

And then George buckles completely, his foot slipping against a stray... feather? Is that what it is? He's not quite sure, but--

It almost happens in slow motion and yet it's almost too fast for Dream to process *exactly* what happened before he realizes he's also slipping.

*Fuck.*

There's a loud *clang* as George's hand slips on an astrolabe on one of Phil's tables, sending it ricocheting across the room before his back slams squarely on the ground, Dream following suit and slamming down, forearms smacking against the wood with a loud *creak* .

Something in him regrets not moving fast enough, at not having taken the opportunity when it was right there, dangling in front of him--

"Dream," George gets out, his voice tinged with pain.



“Sorry,” Dream blurts out. “I’m sorry, I--”

“This is *not* about the fall,” George blurts out. “Just-- you, you’re--”

Dream suddenly realizes.

George looks up at him, his gaze suddenly so vulnerable and almost stunned. His cheeks are tinged a delicate pink, his lips parted as he breathes, shallow and frantic. Dream hovers over George, supported by his forearms. Dream is suddenly hyper-aware of the fact George is so small underneath him, fits so nicely against h--

“Fortuna, what was that *noise*-- ”

Dream’s head jolts up as he hears Phil. He hears Phil’s footsteps, moving to readjust the ceiling. Dream squints against the sudden light filtering in, pale and silver. He hears the shriek of the strings as Phil dispels the music spell, and he hears the creak of wood as Phil leans down to pick up the astrolabe.

“You two didn’t, like, *break* my telescope or anything, did’ja?” Phil’s voice sounds light, humorous as his footsteps draw closer. “That’ll be a *bitch* to fix-- oh.”

Dream senses the shadow crossing over him and George, and he looks up and--

Phil is standing there, holding a stack of books.

The corners of his eyes are crinkled with barely-hidden mirth.

“D’ya need a moment, mates?” Phil snickers.

George’s face goes red.

“No, we-- it’s *really* not what it looks like,” George stammers out.

“I wasn’t saying it *looked* like anything,” Phil says cheerily as he sets the books down on a desk. “Just... I really don’t think you two should be gettin’ to your *couple-y* things... here. It’s a bit dusty.”

“ *Phil*, ” Dream says in a scandalized tone.

“What?” Phil asks, raising an eyebrow. “M just saying.” He laughs a little, wiping at the corner of his eye. “Get up, you two. We’ve got a lot to go over.”

Dream nods shakily, pulling back and standing up, brushing some dust from his pants. He holds out his hand to George, who takes it gratefully. George pulls himself up, grunting a little as he pats down as much of his cape as he can reach. Phil paces about the observatory, fetching more books and rolls of parchment from the shelves, setting them down on his table.

Phil sorts through them, organizing the books so that he can rest his arms on the desk.

“Alright,” Phil hums. “Your Majesty-- can you tell me what you know about magic? It’ll let me get a good idea about what you know and what I need to fill in.”

George hums, rubbing his thumb with his forefinger.

“I-- well, I do know that magic is-- a learned skill,” George starts. “But-- there’s also people with-- inherent talent-- gifts for magic. And like-- you can temper that skill, make it better. Regardless of whether you have a gift or not. Magic is something that-- requires *practice* .”

Phil hums again, nodding his head.

“Yeah, that’s about right,” Phil says. “The majority of people are born without magical gifts, but, with a lot of practice, can become adept at magic. Like me-- I practiced extensively for *years* . But magical gifts can also manifest in various forms-- like Sappnap, who has a gift for fire and heat based magic.”

*Fire and heat based magic, huh?*

Dream remembers the first time Sapnap used his gift for magic--

*"Hey Dream!"*

*Dream looks up from polishing his short training sword, admiring its sheen as he lifts it up from the grindstone. Sapnap is grinning at him, dimples carved deeply into his cheeks as he claps Dream on the back with a firm hand.*

*"Hey, Pandas," Dream greets, continuing to polish his blade. "What'd you come here for?"*

*"Hm," Sapnap hums, still rubbing at Dream's back with his hand. "Just... wanted to see something."*

*Dream feels a sudden burning heat building at his back.*

*It'd started as soon as Sapnap had laid his hand over Dream's back appraisingly, a strange foreign heat that he was so sure hadn't been there before-- but now as Sapnap continues to massage his back with a shit-eating grin on his face, the heat is growing unbearable.*

*And then it hurts.*

*"Sapnap!" Dream shouts now, and Sapnap retracts his hand. "Dude, what the hell-- holy shit!"*

*Sapnap's hand is glowing bright orange, with a gradient to blue towards the center of his palm with blood-red at the tips of his fingers.*

*"Cool, right?" Sapnap says.*

*"I mean, maybe, but you literally just burned my back," Dream complains. He can feel his skin start to blister, painful and stinging. "Where did you learn that?"*

*"Um," Sapnap twists his hand, looking at his palm. "Dunno. Honestly, I was just lookin' at a few*

*books and they taught this variation of-- a heating spell? It was kinda hard to learn, but I wanted to give it a try... I didn't realize I was burning you until--*"

*"It's-it's fine," Dream says softly. "I-- we should probably get it checked out, though."*

"Yeah, I remember when Sapnap was still experimentin' with his magic, he torched the hell out of me. I think I still have the handprint scar on my back," Dream says, a small laugh leaving his lips. "I... I think Dan at the time checked it out? I'm not too sure."

His memory goes a bit blank at that.

Well, it was a long time ago, so it's not *that* big of a deal, right?

"Oh," George says lightly. "My-- my mom-- she had a bit of healing magic. I think she told me a long time ago that she-she had a gift? For it? I'm not sure whether any of that was passed down, though..."

"Oh?" Phil cocks his head. "Well, I could always do a check if you're not sure."

"You can check for that?" George asks, a note of surprise entering his voice.

"Yeah, it's not very hard," Phil says. "It's sort of like-- I'd be able to sense the transferrin' of magical energy in a way? If you want, I can do a check for you as I said."

George looks tentative, his gaze somewhat apprehensive. He nods.

"Sure," George murmurs. "Why not, right? We're already here."

Dream laughs lightly.

"Yeah, fair," Dream says cheerfully. "Might as well take the plunge, right, Your Majesty?"

George sighs, rolling his eyes a little before nodding again.

“Sounds about right,” George says softly. “So, Phil, how do we do the check?”

“Well, it’s quite easy,” Phil says. “Just hold out your hand-- you might feel a *slight* tingle, but it’s not gonna hurt. I can promise you that much, at least. And close your eyes for me, Your Majesty? You too, Dream.”

George stretches out his hand, places it on the worn surface of the wooden table. His fingers are trembling slightly-- with what? Anticipation? Fear? His eyelids flutter shut.

Dream can’t help but think Phil is bullshitting this.

*No fucking chance I’m closing my eyes, Dream thinks resolutely. I don’t trust this.*

Dream watches in a hidden stare as Phil outstretches his hand as well, and Dream feels a sudden rushing of energy towards Phil’s fingertips-- it makes his hair stand on end as Phil’s hand glows a faint green, and George’s fingertips glow a faint rose-gold colored tone.

Blood rushes to Dream’s ears, a choked gasp being forced from his lips as the hand-shaped scar on his back smarts suddenly.

He watches as George winces a little, his fingers suddenly jolting.

“*Shh* .”

Dream startles a little, realizing Phil’s expression is venomous and pointed as his hand continues to flicker a faint green.

*What?*

*What the h--*

“Shame,” Phil says suddenly, his voice suddenly congenial. “Doesn’t seem like you’ve got anything.” His hand retracts, and the rose gold glow in George’s hand dissipates just as quickly. “You can open your eyes now, by the way.”

“Huh,” George comments as he blinks a little. “It *did* tingle quite a bit...” He looks at his hand, clenching his fingers. “That was-- weird. Well, at least there’s nothing.”

***What?***

Dream looks at Phil, glares into him with an accusatory glance.

Phil’s expression furrows ever so slightly.

*Phil told a lie.*

*A lie .*

A single untruth.

Like a leaf clinging desperately to a branch, suddenly jolted by a strong gust of wind.

*How could he?*

*Why would he?*

“So, I’m glad I don’t have to explain the basics of magic to you,” Phil comments lightly. “I figured you knew a bit, but you never know. My focus for this discussion today is mostly about-- my observations about what we can do for the people, and what magical limitations there are.”

“There’s limitations?” George questions. “I mean, I-I figured, but-- what kinds *are* there?”

“Well, for starters,” Phil hums as he pulls out one of the books, leafing through the pages. His hand glows brightly as he weaves together an illusion, glowing silver and green. It’s a projection of--

“Is that Rotam?” Dream questions.

The town looks decrepit, rotting from the inside out.

A corpse of what it used to be, if this can even be considered living at all. The houses are buckling under rot, the trees bare and dry. The ground looks dry, the faintest hints of grass dry and wilting.

“Yes,” Phil says softly. “Skeppy’s been sending me data and projections as he goes-- but what this has proven effectively is that our magic has no effect on this. He’s been attemptin’ to rehydrate the earth and whatnot, but it’s not working. The remnants of the plague that ransacked Rotam have caused the trees and the grass to suffer. And what’s *more* interesting is--”

Phil reaches for a scroll, unfolding it and revealing Skeppy’s hastily scribbled notes. The words are written in borderline chicken-scratch, the desperation of the situation being imprinted through the handwriting alone.

He turns it to Dream and George, and George takes the paper, his eyes tearing into the page.

*Attempt 1:*

*I tried a basic healing charm, the one we use on sickly plants*

*When the spell hit the tree, it was like-- even as I write this, I’m not sure how to describe it.*

*It was like a sponge, Phil It absorbed my magic and when I tried it again the spell just bounced off it altogether, like the tree had just-- perverted the spell altogether*

*It hit me and I was hurting for days on end afterwards*

*Lizzie had to tend to my wounds for days and even now I’m not sure if I’ve fought off the infection completely but it’s the best I can do for now*

*Attempt 2:*

*Tried a potion in an attempt to remove it*

*The same thing happened*

*I don't know why this is happening it's like the entire place is just sick*

*Like this strange corruption or rot is just*

*Permeating everything and I don't know if this is fixable or even like*

*If we could remedy this, Phil*

*I don't know what to tell Bad*

*He was really hoping that this part could be saved, that Rotam wouldn't be destroyed forever but I feel like there's no other options here but to let this rot*

*At least it's not spreading to the other towns.*

*Attempt 3:*

*Lizzie and I tried to destroy it using an explosion, which seems to have done the trick*

*The tree went up quickly but I'm pretty sure that didn't solve anything*

*The tree leaked this Strange... purplish colored tar*

*I have no doubt that this is the source of the infection, of everything-- but we don't dare to get close for fear of getting sick ourselves*

*Will report back if we are able to retrieve a sample of it*

*It gives me a bad feeling but if we can capture some of it maybe it'll be useful in finding a remedy or something*

*Fortuna willing.*

"You get it, right?" Phil says lightly, his voice still somehow calm despite the dread leaking from the page. "Whatever plagues are infecting towns-- magic won't work on it. Believe me-- I'm sure we would've attempted to solve this magically if we could. But as it stands, if minor spells can create such catastrophic effects-- it would be unwise for me to attempt anything."

"I-I suppose that's fair," George murmurs, his grip on the parchment knuckle-white and his face pale. "But, what about food? Were there any attempts at solving the famine?"

Dream feels like he knows the answer to this one even before Phil has to say anything, and yet he waits.

Phil hums at that, the tone sad.



“Due to the limits of magic itself, I’m afraid I couldn’t possibly *do* something like that,” Phil explains. “Magic only has two hard rules-- magic cannot revive or regenerate the dead-- I’m sure we’re all aware of the tales of mages that *attempted* such and... met an unfortunate end. And the other rule is that matter cannot be conjured out of nothing. Obviously, illusions like the ones I create-- that’s just a projection-- it’s not *real* .

“But if I were to create food or the like to feed the whole kingdom-- I’d need a kingdom’s worth of material to *create* it. And unfortunately, we don’t *have* that kind of supply,” Phil finishes, folding his hands on the table. “I’ve got a few sources about that, in case you were curious. Some of the books here are just... light readin’ material.”

Dream eyes one of the books.

It’s about as thick as a tree trunk.

No way that could just be *light* reading material.

“I--” George swallows, glancing at one of the books.

Dream thinks George is probably thinking the same thing as him.

“I’ll pass,” George says softly. “But-- I see these limits more clearly now. Which was the purpose of this whole conversation-- so thank you, Phil. Really.”

“No problem,” Phil says. “I’m glad I could clear some things up for you, at least.”

Phil looks like he wants to end the conversation, but something in Dream flares up.

*He’s not going to let Phil run away from this .*

“So-- ultimately,” Dream says. “What would you say is the cause of all of this, really? Like-- a diagnosis. Do you have one?”

Phil’s expression strains a little.

“Well,” Phil begins delicately. “My own magical senses aren’t that keen, but...” His breath is shaky as he steadies himself. “My own interpretation of what’s going on-- it’s a magical web, with this castle at the center of it. I’ve entertained the idea of calling it a curse, honestly. I feel as if that-- that *moniker* suits these occurrences more.”

*Curse.*

Dream feels a wave of dread wash through him, sees it echoed in George’s face.

“But,” George tries. “If it’s a curse, surely it has a *cause* , something that was-- a catalyst for all of this?”

“That’s somethin’ I’m personally trying to figure out,” Phil replies. “I-I’m not *sure* whether this is a curse or not-- whether it could be *called* a curse is still in question, obviously-- and its cause is even more foreign to me.”

George’s expression turns a bit more desperate.

“Well, I-- regardless, I...” George seems at a loss for words, trying so desperately to find something to say. Anything to say. “Just... if it’s not too much, could you update us-- if-if you find anything?”

“Of course,” Phil says. He pauses. “Well-- if you don’t have any more questions or concerns-- I say our meeting can be adjourned. Thank you for coming on such short notice once again.”

“It’s no problem, Phil,” Dream says. “We didn’t have anything else to do. Plus, this was... enlightening.”

Phil seems to sense Dream’s suspicion, charged and apprehensive.

“Alright, so,” George says, sliding his chair back and standing up. “I guess we’ll be on our way then... Dream?”

Dream waves a hand.

Suspicion bubbles in his chest, a knot forming in his throat.

“Can you wait outside for a second, Your Majesty?” Dream murmurs. “I have to ask Phil something.”

“A-ah, alright,” George says with a nervous bow of his head, exiting the observatory.

“Oh?” Phil asks innocently, cocking his head.

“Yeah,” Dream says, his tone forcibly pleasant.

Dream waits until he hears the observatory door slam shut and George’s footsteps peter out until they’re inaudible.

“Why’d you lie?” Dream starts, getting to the point as directly as he can.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean, Dream,” Phil responds, his tone cold, almost like a warning.

“I’m not an *idiot*, Phil,” Dream retorts, his eyes following Phil as he walks from where he stood near the table over to the railing surrounding the large spiral staircase. “Don’t try and act like I am.”

“Well,” Phil begins, turning around to lean against the railing casually before continuing. “I would never pretend to think you were, mate. But,” He sighs and looks to Dream with a daggering eye. “This isn’t your business to meddle in.”

Rage bubbles deep in Dream’s stomach, red-hot and unbridled. “You’re lying about *George*, ” He grits. “How the *fuck* would that not involve me, Phil?”

“Oh?” Phil grins-- it doesn’t reach his eyes. ““ *George* ,’ ey?”

The fiery rage in Dream's gut immediately freezes over.

"So much for being careful, huh?" Phil deadpans.

"What's your damage," Dream bites, the frostbite burning him intensely, spreading throughout his body. "What the *fuck* is your problem, Phil? Why're you choosing, like-- right *now* to be so *mysterious* or whatever?"

"Oh, nothing in particular," Phil responds. His gaze is impassive, his eyes cold. "Just that I sense a storm brewing. And you're in its eye."

"Wh-what does that even--" Dream tries to press for an answer, but Phil interrupts him.

"Don't press your luck, *Clay* ." His tone is venomous.

Dream can't think.

He can't even breathe--

He swims against the tide, desperately trying to escape it-- but the riptide pulls him farther away from the shore, and he looks up to find a crashing wave pulling him below the surface, choking the last bit of life from him.

Phil steps forward, closing the distance between them--

He rests his hand on Dream's shoulder, his touch ice cold. Phil freezes the rushing ocean, forms a heavy blanket of ice he can never hope to break from, watches as Phil traps him in a hell of his own making--

"Ignorance is bliss, Clay. If you didn't want to know-- you *should've kept your eyes closed*."

Thank you for the support on this chapter! This one was really long and took a lot of effort, so I hope yall like it.

The waltz they're dancing to is Waltz by Mother Falcon, in case you were wondering!

---

Songs I listened to while penning this chapter:

- MCH Vol.1+2=3 (SAD takes)
- Bitter Water
- Tangerine
- Waltz (Mother Falcon)
- Fireflies
- No Children (Mountain Goats)
- Boreas

---

Let me know what yall think in the comments below.

## Chapter 17

It's going well, surprisingly.

George is surprised at the fact he's so willing to admit it.

Nothing's gone wrong.

For a *month*.

The day-by-day grind had been monotonous enough that time flew by quickly-- the sands in the hourglass flowing smoothly from one point to the other. Maybe the most surprising thing is just how fast time continues to roll forward-- continues to revolve.

They'd experimented with a few more caravans, gathered surplus from the few willing dignitaries--

All of that had gone off without a hitch.

Things are going *well* .

As he looks out the window, at the stormy sky littered with dark clouds--

He tries to relax, tries to believe that everything will work out.

He fights the anxiety bubbling within him, the strange sense that something's going to fall apart, tip his castle of cards slightly left or right, causing a horrible cascade.

He steels his nerves.

Tries to *focus* on the conversation currently at hand, on the meeting that *he* called.

Tries to still his beating heart, tries to stay even a little optimistic--

“We’ve gotten reports that Tero and Trivere have gotten the caravans,” Bad says as he taps the map with an appraising hand. “Trifolium and Quercus have a bit longer to go-- but the people have been grateful for the supplies. Manifold and Purpled should be on their ways back from Tero and Trivere soon enough-- but what we’re here to discuss is mostly the next plan of action.”

Right.

The next step of the plan-- is to branch out, spread supplies across Fortuna to the best of their abilities.

They sit in the meeting hall, a large board with lists and maps littered across it set up in the center.

The last time they’d sat here, the room was littered with paper lanterns and incense burners, an artificially perfumey scent wafting through the air.

The last time they’d sat here, George had shrunk back-- had run from the tidal wave of horrible emotions threatening to swallow him whole. It’d caught up to him in the end, bursting his fragile shell clean open--

But this time’s different.

Because he’s not--

He’s not *that* scared.

He’d be lying if he said he wasn’t a touch apprehensive, because he is-- but--

But maybe it’s okay to let himself relax, if just by a fraction.

Niki and Tubbo are there with Wilbur and Tommy respectively, and George sits in a simple chair with Dream perched behind him, standing at attention.

Sometimes the sky flickers, the sun disappearing behind swabs of thick grey clouds, and the entire meeting hall darkens, dark grey and ominous.

But he won't let this affect him--

*Focus .*

George lifts up one of the itemized lists that Bad had placed before him, examining it with a critical eye.

There was still so much surplus left over, even after Scott distributed a large portion of the surplus to initial towns.

"We've got quite a while before we hit the theoretical limit on surplus," Bad intones as he paces back and forth, studying the map of Fortuna again. "And even then, the castle is still getting supplies from towns that are still producing supplies, so I'm doubtful that we will ever hit the upper limit on what we're able to distribute. I know that some... dignitaries are still asking for more supplies as well." Bad's brow furrows ever so slightly as he continues to pace, stopping at one of the meeting hall's windows.

"I've sent out Antfrost and Velvet to take a look at towns that are still healthy in an attempt to estimate at what point they may become susceptible to plagues or famines or *whatever*'s going on-- they haven't yet sent me data, but I'm hoping for good results."

"What of Skeppy and Lizzie?" Tubbo pipes up. "How are they doing at the moment?"

Bad's gaze flits to the window, out at the cloudy day before his hand reaches up to tug at his black tie, loosening it slightly. Out of the corner of George's eye, he spots a brilliant blue brooch snapping it into place--

*Has he always had that thing?* George wonders.



Well, no matter.

“Phil called us in a bit ago,” George responds to Tubbo. “Showed me some of Skeppy’s notes-- I think they’re still out doing research?”

Bad’s eyes widen, his pace quickening as he returns back to the map.

“Huh? No, that’s-- that ought to be old,” Bad responds hastily. “Z-- Skeppy sent me a letter yesterday-- he-he said he and Lizzie were making their way back to the castle. Not completely unscathed, I think-- but they’ve got data that may... help with my own investigation of Fortuna’s situation.”

“Oh, Bad, you’re doing an individual study?” Niki questions. “I remember you mentioning it before-- did you reach a block in it?”

“Yes, unfortunately,” Bad murmurs. “I had to make a few assumptions with the data-- assume that the data I’d gotten was the *beginning* of when the plagues started-- but I found some old scrolls stored away that suggest that-- well, it’s very interesting, see,” Bad brightens up as he speaks, clasping his hands together. “This appears *cyclical* . Some of the older things stored away in the Archives-- oh, you’d be surprised at how much is just-- stored away, right out of sight--

“Old scriptures *suggest* that Fortuna has worked in cycles from the beginning-- periods of great prosperity followed by great imbalance. These specific shifts and down periods were connected to great periods of civil and political unrest-- great revelations. It’s very interesting-- but I’ve got no other leads for the situation at this point. We have to focus on what’s at hand at the moment.”

George’s mind whirls a little at the implications-- at the details, stacking up before his eyes. Ideas and strange hints that he’s not quite sure about--

It feels like something should be making sense right about now.

Something that he’s not even sure exists-- an answer that to a question that hasn’t been put to paper.

“I’m gonna be honest, big man, I wasn’t paying any attention to that shit,” Tommy pipes up. “A lot of words, man. My brain went--”

“Tommy,” Tubbo whines.

Tommy shuts his mouth.

Bad’s brow furrows a little as he looks at Tommy, but he shakes his head before looking back to the board.

“All that aside,” Bad says falteringly, “Let’s focus on what’s at hand here-- the next phase of this plan. Your Majesty-- do you have any other towns that you were thinking about distributing supplies to?”

“Uh--” George scrounges through his memory, trying to remember-- “I was- I was thinking about sending some supplies to Adrotans as well as--as Gladio and Clypeus. We should follow up on the caravans we’d sent out to some of the healthier towns as well-- just so they have enough supplies in case something happens.”

“Oh?” Bad asks, cocking his head. “Well, that’s probably the most sensible, I think. I’ll make a note of that for next time, and let Scott know.”

George relaxes his shoulders, lets out a long exhale and leans his head back to watch the ceiling.

There’s the faint rumble of thunder from a distance.

It makes George somewhat uneasy.

He’s never been a fan of thunder.

Rain’s alright, sure-- but thunder overstays its welcome. Makes a big deal out of itself, tries to place itself at the dominant forefront-- and it doesn’t even do anything except resonate, a horrible rumble against the earth, send an unpleasant churn in the pit of George’s stomach--

But it’s nothing to worry about just yet, he thinks.

Thunder doesn't necessarily predate a big storm.

So why does he feel uneasy?

Why does he get the distinct sense that something's not right?

It's just everything building up, isn't it?

He's in a high-stress situation-- of course, he's bound to get *nerves*.

"Is there anything else on the schedule today, Bad?" Niki brings up, her voice lilting pleasantly. "If not, I'd like to take my leave. I'm a bit busy today with lessons-- Phil wanted to show me a spell."

"Yes, give me a moment-- I wanted to go over what we're planning on doing for the winter months, actually-- given that fall is setting in more and winter is soon to take hold-- what will be the distributing schedule for surplus then?" Bad brings up, sweeping his hand against the board-- new sheets of paper flutter from the stacks surrounding him, pinning themselves to the bulletin. "I think these are valid points to go over early on in the process, so we're not swamped with the chaos that winter brings."

"Fair," George says softly. "Well, I personally was thinking--"

As George speaks, there's a sudden *crack* that rings through the air.

It's loud.

Louder than the previous quiet rumbles of thunder.

But it's the kind of loud that doesn't really sink in until you're already on your knees, your hands over your ears, your eyes screwed shut.

The kind of loud that you don't realize was far too loud until it's already over.

His heart fills with trepidation, his nerves tingling with a foreign sense of *knowing* .

And then he hears the whistling rain.

It sends a sudden wave of dread down George's spine, paralyzing him immediately. His fingers tense, his tendons tugging to the point of breaking-- His vision swims a little-- he swears the floor is shaking, his knees suddenly going weak-- he's *falling, falling, falling* even as he sits in his chair--  
-

Unwillingly, against his own will, against his body screaming at him to not look outside--

He turns his head to the window, and--

The rain is a silver blanket, pouring tortuously down, sheets of horrible silver silk falling to the ground at terminal velocity--

"Is-is it supposed... to rain?" George's voice doesn't tremble as he speaks, his voice small against the thundering of his ears. His hands tremble as they clench the parchment in front of him-- there's the faint *thwip, thwip, thwip* as it vibrates, his grip knuckle-white--

"Oh," Bad comments casually. "It's been on our radar for a while. A nasty storm's been brewing all week, Your Majesty."

George's mind goes blank.

His vision is stained white, his ears clouding with static as his mind dwells on the thundering rain in his ears, the horrible repeating rain--

*No, no, no, no, no--*

He swears he can scent the thunder on his tongue, taste the horrible, blistering electricity from the

sky--

*I have to get back.*

*I can't believe I--*

*What was I thinking--*

George feels like he's teetering on the edge of a dark void, his toes dangling right on the precipice, one good shove or a breath of wind away from plummeting, falling, never to be seen again--

It's a delicate game, dancing on the edge of a void this vast, avoiding the seconds away from falling into mania; it's a delicate game George is *bound* to be the loser in--

He lets go, involuntarily allowing himself to fall off a border that's paper-thin--

He falls into it, its empty nothingness enveloping him, entangling around his heart, swallowing him whole--

Static pounds in his head, his ears--

His heartbeat is barely audible over the crashing and whispering of the rain--

The faintest crack of thunder--

He's already at a run when he comes to his senses.

He hears the faint cries of the others behind him as he runs, racing the crashing sounds of the rain-- they beg him to stop, to come back-- to *explain*--

“*George!*”

George hears Dream calling his name, a prayer torn from reverent, desperate lips--

He doesn't know what to do. His eyes burn, his hands are shaking-- and yet he knows he has to *leave* . He needs to get back home, before-- before the *storm* takes it away from him-- takes the last thing that ties him back to the one place that he's ever felt safe in, ever felt like he *belongs* --

How could he have forgotten? How could he have been so *foolish*? How had he managed to lose himself in the gilded edges, in the brilliant fakeness of it all--

How had he forgotten the *one thing*--

The mud stains his boots as he splashes onto the field, nearly losing his traction on the wet earth. He falls forward, slamming against the earth, his gloves bleeding wet cold onto his palms, his fingers--

He can't stop.

He *can't stop*.

It's been far too late to stop, to undo any of this--

So he keeps running, through the horrible burning pain of his lungs--

He finally breaches the stables as the rain pours down around him, the cape that Eret had tailored for him growing heavier and heavier as the cold rain soaks into it, freezing his bones, letting the wet chill bleed into his veins, his *entire being*—

George collapses onto one of the stable doors, his breath coming out unevenly as he tries to gulp oxygen down, tries to focus—

“Your Majesty! Oh my goodness, are you alright?”

George's gaze snaps up as he sees Puffy standing before him, her hand reaching out to touch his shoulder—

George immediately lurches back, a hand on the clasp that's keeping his cape together. He fumbles with it, wringing his fingers as the cape comes free, falling onto the muddy ground in a heap.

"Puffy, I need a horse," George gasps out as he tries moving forward into the stables, but his legs wobble a bit as he collapses to his knees in the mud, in the rain— the rain already is soaking into the ornate clothes underneath the cape— he feels goosebumps crawling up his neck at the horrible chill—

"Your-Your Majesty, it's too *dangerous* to-to be out on a horse in this kind of weather— you could get hurt—"

"Please, Puffy, I just-- I need a horse, I need to get *out* of here--" George begs desperately as he tries to take another step, his boots sinking a little into the mud, a horrible wet *squelch* permeating the thundering rain--

"At least tell me what you need it for, Your Majesty-- it's not good for the horses to be out in the rain," Puffy tries, her gaze torn. "I-I want to help you, I *do* , it's just--"

Right.

Explain, explain it.

Try and get it from the beginning.

George pulls at the strings of his own memories, trying to weave them together, string the beads of morphemes into a necklace of sentences that can convey what he has to do, *why* he has to leave--

"I just-- I need to-- I need to go-- go back, somewhere, it's-it's important to me," George stammers out.

The beads are unwieldy, they click against each other in a way that doesn't make sense, that

chafes--

Puffy frowns, crossing her arms.

“I-- I can’t let you,” she says apologetically. “It’s far too dangerous for the horses, not to mention dangerous for *you*, Your Majesty. Is-is there any chance you could go tomorrow, when it’s supposed to be clearer out? Surely it’s-- surely it’s not *that* urgent.”

It is.

It is that urgent.

This house means--

His *home* means *everything to him* and he can’t--

He can’t be wasting his time here, trying to explain it to someone who could never understand him, would *never understand*--

He needs out of here.

He can’t just keep wasting time here-- because every second that ticks by, that gets pulled unwillingly forward and torn away from him is more time for the river in front of his house to fill, more time for the roots to crumble in on themselves and more time for the rot, the mold, the *decay* to consume his sanctuary whole--

George’s heart curls unpleasantly, a sudden darkness creeping in, turning him *bitter*—

“*I need a horse, and that’s a fucking ORDER, Puffy,*” George shouts.

Puffy’s eyes go wide suddenly, her hands starting to tremble as she steps back, reaching out to grasp at the wooden gate of the stable.



“Yes-- yes, right away, Your Majesty-- I’m-I’m sorry--”

“Save it,” George bites out.

When did he become so cruel?

When had he become so willing to envelop himself in it-- the mean retort leaving his lips so easily--  
-

It doesn’t matter.

There’s no time for self-reflection, for regrets, not when his heart pounds so loudly in his ears, when it beats so rapidly in his ribcage, a desperate little thing desiring its freedom more than anything--

He needs a horse, and he needs to get home--

He needs to *get away from here*.

He watches as Puffy hurriedly leads Weiss out, beginning to saddle him hastily and with quickening efficiency--

George’s mind races unpleasantly, his pulse in his throat--

*“George. Promise me that you won’t ever leave the house without permission,” his mother says. Her hands reach down to grasp his shoulders as she kneels down to make eye contact with him. Her eyes are soft, yet hardened with concern-- her fingers almost tremble as she grips onto him, holding him close.*

*“Why would I?” George asks, cocking his head to the side. “You and dad are here. It’s my home , mom. I’m not just gonna leave.”*

*His mother sighs, tucking a strand of George's hair behind his ear.*

*"I know. But one day-- when you're old enough-- you might feel that call for adventure," his mother murmurs. "That daring sense to leave. And maybe then, you'll have forgotten everything your father and I have warned you against-- but please, never forget this. The house is safe-- and so is Somnium. Our home."*

Home.

He needs to get home--

He didn't want to become a *hero*, never wanted to take the *call to adventure*-- he'd refused it, he'd tried to deny it-- and when he's finally accepted it, a cold front threatens to take it all away.

George snaps to his senses as he sees Puffy urge Weiss forward, gently leading him towards the center of the stables. George steps forward, his boots sinking into the mud as he strides forward with a renewed sense of urgency--

"Do-do you need help getting on him, Your Majesty?" Puffy asks, a note of apprehension in her voice as George draws closer.

"No, I'm alright. Thank you, Puffy," George says as briskly as he possibly can, even as his hands tremble and his body begins to shake as the cold finally bleeds through his skin, stabbing straight through his heart. He slips his foot through the right stirrup, pulling himself up and hoisting his left leg over Weiss's side. He tries to steel his beating heart to no avail-- it throbs in his chest, pounding wildly as finally, *finally*, he can run, run free--

He clenches the reins, snapping them slightly.

And as Weiss begins to move forward and turn, George's heart nearly freezes in his chest.

*"Your Majesty--"*

George's gaze snaps to see--

Dream's standing at the edge of the stables, clutching onto a fence post as he gasps in the chilled, wet air. His entire face is wet, soaked from rain-- tears-- George can't be bothered to tell, can't be concerned with the details--

*I have to leave.*

*I need to go--*

George snaps the reins.

"Weiss!" he shouts, his voice barely audible against the beating rain.

And as he and Weiss take off, George squeezes his stinging eyes shut, trying to shut out the desperation in his heart and *concentrate*. Concentrate on the one thing he has to do, the one goal he has to reach--

The one thing he should've been doing right from the beginning.

How could he have been so foolish to believe-- to believe everything was working out*well*?

How could he have been *dumb* enough to believe it'd stay that way-- that nothing could rip out the roots he'd begun to unwillingly plant into the castle?

How could he have let down his guards, lowered his walls?

How could he have convinced himself to ignore his old life--

Ignore the *one thing* that matters more to him than his own *being*--

He won't make that mistake again.

So even if he has to do something he regrets, he'll take this jump recklessly.

Because, overall, his home is the *only* thing that matters to him this intensely.

And he's always been particularly bad with ignoring the things that matter so, so much to him.

--

Dream screams his desperation into the open air, whirling on Puffy.

"HOW *COULD* YOU? HOW COULD YOU JUST LET HIM GO --" Dream shouts, voice raw as his hand trembles-- he tries to steady himself, clutching at the ache in his side. It *burns*, and he coughs a little as he raises his head, his eyes stinging against the rain.

Puffy's gaze turns indignant, almost afraid.

"Are you *kidding* me, Dream?" she demands. "I couldn't have refused an order from the *king*! What if-- what if he'd had me *executed* for-for refusing to obey him, or something?"

Dream's mind flashes with indignation. Anger, frustration.

"Are you *SHITTING* me, Puffy?" Dream demands, stepping forward-- he catches Puffy taking a step back from him, almost as if she's repelled by him-- "Does that-- does that seem like the kind of thing *George* would do?"

Puffy's lips part, mouthing over a silent response-

"Well, Dream-- how would *I* know?" Puffy asks, her tone accusatory. "I'm not the king's *personal lackey*! As far as *I'm* aware, when the royal dignitaries refused to acknowledge His Majesty's plans, he *stormed* off! I'm sure that a stubborn man like *that* wouldn't hesitate to behead me if I refused to listen to him!"

What?

The--

*Holding George close, pressing him close to his chest as he sobbed and screamed his sorrow against the world, his voice growing hoarse--*

*Dream presses George close to his chest, envelops him with his very being-- as if just by being there, he can shut out the despair crashing through George-- plant a seed of hope somewhere deep in George's chest--*

*For you, George-- I'll make it so you never have to feel this again.*

*I'll become something strong-- to hold you. To keep your roof from caving in-- because I'll be here.*

*I'm here, I won't ever leave you--*

*If it's for you-- I'd do anything.*

That had been taken as--

“But-- he's-- he's not *like* that, I *know* him,” Dream stammers.

Puffy scoffs.

“Well *I* don't. And maybe you should get it through your *thick* skull that we don't *all* know what the king's like! Because *guess what*, Dream! We're not *all* you! I didn't know he'd-- he'd fucking, what, *storm* out here in the middle of flash-flood weather and ask for a horse?” Puffy exclaims, throwing her hands up before letting them fall slack at her sides. “*You* were supposed to stop him! That's *your* job, not mine.”

“How was I-- how was *I* supposed to know--”

“Because *YOU SAID YOU KNEW!*”

Dream’s breath catches in his throat.

Despite the frigid rain and wind, his eyes burn with heat, his eyes almost stinging as his hot tears mingle with the cool drops falling heavy from the sky.

“Did--” Puffy laughs, her tone almost incredulous. “Did you let him run away just so you could *chase* after him, Dream?!”

*Chase?*

What does that mean to him, really?

Is it just a casual walk, void of bloodlust?

Or is it more of a hunt--

Is it the stalking, the *pinning* down--

Is it the desire to *rip* and *tear* and *destroy* --

Is it the desire to *trap*--

To make it so George can’t *leave* , can only *pick him*--

Anger, hot and heavy, flows through him, tearing at his throat.

“That’s *not* it--” Dream shouts. “I-- I don’t-- I’d *never* --”

“Well, it sure doesn’t *seem* like it to me,” Puffy says, her voice turning a touch exasperated. “You should’ve *figured this out* before you came to yell at me. I’m just here trying to do my *job*-- ”

Cold resignation flows through Dream now-- heated desperation beating in his heart, like an ember succumbing to the chill of the air surrounding it-- turning the edges green and dark blue-- the ember’s center still burning bright yellow and orange--

“Puffy,” Dream’s voice cracks a little as he tries to stifle his tears. “I just-- I get it. I fucked up, alright? But-- I-- I really need a horse. I need-- I need to ch--” Not chase. He’s not cornering George, he’s not trying to hunt him to the ends of the earth-- “I need to go *after* him.”

Puffy pauses.

She opens her mouth to speak, but Dream raises his hands as if to protect himself from an attack he knows is coming.

“ *Please* ,” Dream whispers, his plea barely audible against the rain. “I’m-- I’m not asking for anything else.”

His hands tremble.

“ *Please.* ” He fights off a wince at the desperate crack of his voice.

Puffy’s mouth parts again, but she shuts her mouth, her lips pressing into a frown before she sighs.

“Alright, go on,” Puffy says, her voice softer now. “Go grab Spirit. I’ll get the stuff for you.”

Dream gives a curt nod to Puffy, watching helplessly as she turns and disappears into the room holding saddling equipment.

He rolls his shoulders, attempting to ease *some* of the tension holding him together, though he knows he can’t beat the adrenaline rush coursing through his veins.

*She's right, y'know.* Dream's thoughts pound against his skull. *You're selfish-- all you ever do is chase--*

*All you ever do is chase after people you can't have.*

*Chase after ideals you can't ever hope to reach—*

Dream shakes his head-- he doesn't have time to beat himself up. Not when George needs him.

Following Puffy's command, Dream walks over to the stable housing the familiar, rambunctious horse, Spirit-- the first and only horse to buck him off.

The first and only horse to make Dream look like a fool who didn't know what he was doing.

Dream sighs, unlocking the gate holding Spirit in their stable, walking forward to extend a hand and give an uneasy pat to their muzzle.

Seeing Spirit again, gentle without resolve, it forces him to think about that day in the fields. Along the old beaten dirt path he knows all too well, the day when--

*It all happens at once-- a quick jolt, a loud thud, a ringing in his left ear and an ache in his back.*

*Dream groans, lifting his arm up to shield his eyes from the sun beating down on him; he can hear Tommy calming down Spirit somewhere behind him.*

*Footsteps approach him, a voice cutting in. "Are you sure this is a good idea," George-- of course he's mocking him. "Yes, Your Majesty-- I am so sure I am such a good horse rider --"*

*"... 's just the one," Dream forces the words out from his chest, the pain blooming around his lungs. "Just the one horse. I'm way-- way better at this, usually."*



*Dream hears George snort-- ow, that doesn't feel too good on his pride. He has half a mind to pout about it, but he figures that would only give George more fuel.*

*"Please," Dream groans, uncovering his face to look at George's face, shining with more mirth and glee than he's ever seen it before— "Don't make f--"*

*"You look so stupid right now--" And then George laughs. His entire body shakes with the force of it, a string of giggles falls from his mouth as he bends over to hug his sides.*

*Dream swears he sees George say something-- but he doesn't hear it, it never reaches his ears.*

*He howls with laughter, nearly falling to his knees in the process, and typically Dream would be laughing along with him.*

*But he can't look away.*

*Dream can't tear his eyes from George's expression-- the way his eyes are scrunched together, how his cheeks strain from the weight of his smile, how his nose scrunches as he inhales to catch his breath.*

*From the angle he's at, with the sunlight posed just behind him, Dream could swear he's an angel.*

*He allows himself to ogle right up until he sees George's eyes open, his expression altering ever so slightly as he looks to Dream-- he must look insane. George looks almost contemplative, as if he can see the blooming roots in Dream's chest— ones he hadn't even realized were there—*

*And yet, as a hesitant laugh leaves Dream's lips, George returns to snickering—*

*And Dream knows, right then—*

*That George is a golden sun—*

*A sun that he would do anything to bask in the warmth of. One that he'd offer himself up as kindling for, if it kept shining. One that would provide the energy for the twisting roots inside his heart to bloom into something beautiful-- something sturdier.*

*Something greener, something safer.*

*Something true.*

Dream shakes his head, pushing the memory out of his head. He can reminisce later.

Grabbing the bridle off the nearby post, Dream methodically puts it over Spirit's head, fastening the straps snugly around their head in a few practiced movements. Ensuring it's attached properly, he grabs onto the reins and leads Spirit out into the main area.

Puffy exits from the small structure with a saddle and its accompanying blanket, setting them down on a bench nearby.

Without a word, Puffy begins saddling Spirit in the same way Dream remembers her teaching him— saddle blanket first, make sure it's snug so the horse is comfortable, then the saddle and its straps. Jiggle it once, then twice to make sure it's on good, then you're ready.

He can still hear the way she'd say “*you're ready to ride!*” at the end of the lessons when she'd teach him and Sapnap to take care of a horse. Dream smiles weakly despite himself.

The memory is still warm against the bitter cold.

Dream turns to Puffy, who's doing the final checks on the security of the saddle with a stern expression. Guilt flickers through him, and he opens his mouth to speak— to say *something*, to fill the empty space with words in the color of his remorse for yelling at her—

“Puffy?” Dream starts quietly. She perks up, looking at him in an acknowledging manner, one to show she's listening.

He pauses, trying to organize his racing thoughts. Trying to sort between the regret and the

longing, the agony and the apologies. Without really thinking much on it, he lets his voice come out quietly.

“‘M sorry.” His voice cracks, tears swelling again at the corners of his eyes-- pooling, but not falling.

Puffy’s face softens.

“Oh, duckling,” She stands from where she’s kneeling next to Spirit, making her way over to stop in front of Dream. “It’s alright, really. It is, you’re just-- you’re just scared, I think.”

Dream’s breathing becomes shaky.

In reality, that isn’t too far off.

He *is* scared.

He’s scared he can’t *do* this.

He’s scared he’s not strong enough for this.

He’s scared he never will be.

It terrifies him that he’ll let George down.

The only thing he can do right now, though, is try and change that.

Puffy reaches for Dream’s shaking hands, holding them steadily in her own.

Her hands are warm, worn with deep calluses of her own-- matched by his own--

He breathes in deep, giving a gentle squeeze to Puffy's hands-- a silent reminder that he's thankful for this, for her help and care.

No words are exchanged between them, just an understanding that Dream needs to leave with Spirit now that they're ready to go. He drops his grip from her hands and walks over to Spirit's side. After hoisting his right foot up onto the stirrup and swinging his left leg over their back to secure on the other side, he's ready to go.

The rain just outside the open stables door is coming down in heavy layers-- the raindrops just *look* painful. Dream's back stiffens instinctually, his grip around the saddlehorn tightens.

"Hey, Puffy?" Dream's voice is hollow, all of the adrenaline coursing through him completely avoiding putting energy into anything that isn't *go, go go*.

He relaxes his shoulders and turns around to look her in the eyes-- eyes that are full of hurt meet eyes of knowing, of sympathetic mirrored pain.

"...thank you," His tone is hushed, quiet, barely audible above the thundering skies. "Thank you Puffy, really."

She gives him a weak smile and a nod.

"Of course, Dream." Puffy's tone mirrors Dream's. "Bring him back safe."

"I will." Dream grabs the reins around Spirit's neck, snapping them once. They roar to life, setting off into a trot directly into the enveloping rain.

Sounds of howling wind and piercing rainfall drown out any other sounds around him, the galloping of Spirit's hooves barely audible. Moving purely on practiced instinct, Dream guides Spirit down the old-worn dirt trail that leads to the fields.

Adrenaline catches backup with Dream, echoing the pounding of his heart up into his ears. A mantra repeats in his mind like a record scratched on loop-- *please be safe, please be okay*.

*Please be waiting for me.*

Once they hit the field, Dream realizes he's out of directions to follow; stuck in the rain with no guide on where George could have gone. His heart pounds in his ears as desperation and adrenaline floods through him--

It's too late to head back into the palace and get a map, not that he'd even be able to read one with this kind of downpour.

He may have an idea, but absolutely no idea how to get there. He can't know what he doesn't know-- and George's path and destination are so unknown, so distant-- and yet Dream needs to give pursuit.

Every second that ticks away now is more time for George to disappear, pull away from him--

Dream tries to look around for hints, clues, *anything* to point where George may have gone, and he believes it to be futile-- until he notices the mud.

Hoof prints in the mud, leading down into the forest-- they're fresh.

The pouring rain fills into them, beginning to erode at the fresh edges, nearly wiping them away--

Dream's heart pounds in his chest, in his ears--

The tips of his fingers tingle with the chill as he adjusts the reins.

*Chase after him--*

*While they're still fresh, while you can still see them--*

He can't be careful. Can't be careful when this seems to be the only good lead now--

Without another thought, Dream snaps Spirit's reins again and speeds in the direction following the prints.

Rain pours down in sheets around him, veiling anything within a few feet in front of him. He can only look down at the wet mud, at the still-visible hoofprints, at the silvery curtains of rain cascading around him, soaking Spirit, soaking *him*, his hair--

Void of much visibility, he can hear the pounding of his heart-- sense the bitter chill of the rain on his hands, his chest, his legs-- sense the faint cold prickling in his ears and nose--

It's the only thing keeping him still somewhat focused-- somewhat *grounded*--

Spirit moves in tandem with his beating heart, the thudding gallops matching the *thud-thud-thud* of his desperate heartbeat—

Weiss's muddy hoofprints are Dream's only way of tracking George— of following a trail that leads to his end goal, the objective of his *quest*—

*A quest?*

Is that what George is to him? A quest— something to be conquered, to win—

That doesn't feel right.

That doesn't begin to explain *any* of his thoughts— his devotion.

Dream thinks that even without the quest— even without the archaic idea of George's heart being something to conquer and claim wholly— his devotion to George wouldn't change. His loyalty—

Even if the whole world is crashing down, he wants George to know he'll be right there.

He wants George to realize that.

That *caring* for him— as a friend— as-as *something*—

Does Dream want more?

Does he dare cross the last boundary that he thinks he still has—

Would he do it in George's name?

Does he dare become *reckless*?

His flickering thoughts fade a little as he catches sight of a house.

Dream faintly remembers it, from the first time he'd caught sight of George.

*I knew he would run back here.*

The red door is darkened from the rain, the moss and grass surrounding the quaint cottage already soaked. The tree leaves coat the ground like a wet and stifling blanket, squelching when Spirit steps on top of them.

A dim light is emanating from inside the house— a signal showing someone's inside.

Spirit's hooves coming to a gradual yet fast-paced stop as Dream tugs on the reins. He hears the intensity die down as he approaches the post where Weiss is tied up under a small wooden canopy to shield him from the downpour. Dream ties Spirit next to Weiss and gives them both an affirming pat as he attempts to settle his own nerves, ultimately swallowing his pride and heading for the cottage.

His steps are heavy, making deep imprints with his boots in the mud as he runs to open the bright red door.

Dream feels his heart stammer with nerves and panic as he places a rough grip on the door handle, wrenching it open with a loud *slam* .

The wooden door creaks loudly as the hinges of it open with much more force than Dream intended to apply to the poor architecture, but he can't find it in himself to care. The sound echoes and reverberates around the small main room. George snaps his neck towards Dream at an alarming speed, fumbling with something— a *bag?*— in his hands.

It's almost like George *sees* him but doesn't really perceive him, brushing past him immediately to move towards the wall of the room, taking the bag in his arms with him. He's completely focused on something else-- far too engrossed to truly pay attention to Dream.

The bag is a burlap sack, clearly holding something with serious weight, judging from the strain on George's face as he slaps it down onto the pile of identical bags in front of the door adjacent to the kitchen.

Dream watches George, not really comprehending what he's doing-- the thumping in his ears is too loud, the feeling of just-- trying to grasp onto something, *anything* , the desperate urge to *understand* what the hell George is doing almost winning out over his worry. Once George drops the bag he's holding onto the pile, he runs to the back room again-- Dream follows close behind, trying not to startle him too much.

Wooden floorboards creak underneath the weight of Dream's steps. The warped planks bent gently under the pressure, held together by what feels like a thread. Looking closely, Dream can see gentle scrapes and grooves etched into the ground beneath his feet. This sentiment carries around the entire room; with the ceiling having places where it molds and bends due to damage, spots on the wall where paint had been chipped away, furniture with chips and stains-- every nook and cranny of this home had a memory attached to it. An explanation for its imperfections.

*If only walls could talk*, Dream thinks. *I would listen to their stories of this place all day.*

Not that he has the time to right now, anyway.

As he steps through the worn door frame into the bedroom proper, Dream instantly recoils a small amount. The room has... an eerie feeling, borderline melancholic. Dust layers on the pictures hung upon the walls, on the bedside tables, on the thinly threaded drawn curtains. A fine layer of dirt is gathered in a coat across the floor. The bed is made in a way that suggests it hadn't been slept in



for years. The air carries a strange medicinal-yet-sickly scent that he can't quite name.

But that's not what Dream is here for.

He can't just keep-- *spacing* out, not when it looks like George is desperately grappling for purchase against an enemy he doesn't quite understand.

The space feels completely devoid of life, save for the rustling in the wardrobe at the far side of the room.

George is hunched over what looks to be more burlap sacks. As Dream approaches, he sees the heavy-set strain on George's face as he tries to lift multiple of the bags at once with no success.

"Need some help, George?" Dream asks, his voice far softer than it has any right to be, carrying across the chilled, haunting air. He sees George flinch from the sound of his words shattering the stillness permeating the room, snapping his attention from the pile and up to Dream.

Finally *seeing* him.

"W-what're you doing here," George asks, voice wavering. "Why are you *here*?"

*He's mad-- you weren't careful enough-- you have to take a step back--*

"You--" Dream closes his mouth, biting back the retort forming on his tongue. *What the hell do you mean, 'what're you doing here'?* He wants to say. *I came here for you.* "Let me help you, George. What're these for and where do I need to move them to?" He points down at the stack of bags, his voice somewhat demanding, somewhat curious as he tries to grapple with the roar of emotions flowing in his chest.

"I-- They--" George wrings his hands, trying to collect his words in a way that makes sense. His lips move wordlessly as he tries to gather his thoughts, his hands working restlessly, index finger rubbing against thumb over and over and over again. "Sandbags. They're-- they're to stop the rain from flooding and fucking up the house, I-I need these ones to block the front door," He reaches down to grab one off of the top. "I already got the rest of it blocked off, just, these ones are the heaviest."

Dream offers him a small nod and grabs two sandbags from the pile, struggling to keep his balance as he attempts to redistribute the weight across his shoulders. *Holy shit, he wasn't kidding-- these are heavy*, Dream comments to himself as he finally rights himself and follows George out of the bedroom and to the front door.

*How did he do this before, on his own?* Dream wonders to himself as he presses forward.

He feels like a ship with a grounding anchor, sinking deeper and deeper into a bottomless ocean. His movements don't feel quite real, don't really have the strength that he *thinks* they should-- dropping the sandbags onto the ever increasing pile doesn't feel much like anything, a gentle tug to his arm which feels as weak and weightless as jelly.

And yet he has to continue, he has to *push forward* for George, as long as he's *alright* --

They repeat this motion again, dropping the sandbags onto each other and securely blocking the entrance off. After the last bag is placed, Dream sees George's shoulders untense-- he physically relaxes for the first time since he arrived.

Not paying much attention to Dream, George walks past him to finish something; Dream can't be bothered to figure out exactly what.

He kneels next to the bags, attempting to busy himself and drown out his deafening thoughts that seem to be on loop by shifting them around a bit.

*You need to be careful. You need to be careful. You need to be careful.*

Dream dispels the thoughts with one particularly hard shove to one of the burlap sacks, knocking the one of the bags over. *Shit*. He reaches out a hand to pull it up, to readjust it-- but he hesitates. *It's just one bag, isn't it?*

*Is it gonna make that much of a difference?*

He doesn't have much time to think about it further.

From behind him, he hears the door to the bedroom shut, followed by the jingle of some keys and a soft locking noise. Within seconds, quiet enough that he nearly misses it, he hears George sighs in what *sounds* like relief-- almost like a physical pressure had been lifted off of his chest, opening his lungs back up for a rush of air to enter.

*He's okay*, Dream tells himself. *You did alright, he's still solid, you've been careful enough.*

The golden lines he's made hold firm.

The golden strings, intertwining his and George's lives together-- hold firm. Hold them together, hold them close.

Dream tries not to think about what would happen if the lines were to break.

He takes a breath, tensing up his entire body, pulling his shoulders high, to the point they almost touch his ears-- and lets it go, loosening his body entirely. His heart still throbs in his chest, the sound of the *babump, babump, babump* almost deafening.

*Focus.*

Dream turns, looking back at George.

George's eyes are misty, not really focused on anything. He sways a little, to the beat and downpour of the rain, pulled by an invisible conductor. It doesn't even look like George is really *focusing* on what he's doing, just spaced out in thoughts that Dream can't fathom, can't hope to understand. He tries to follow George's gaze, but only finds him focusing on the ground, at a small divot where wood rot is setting in.

*Focus.*

"Hey," Dream tries. "Mind if I light a fire?"

George's eyes suddenly snap with a startling clarity, and he blinks a little.

"I-- yeah, sure," George murmurs. "Firewood's-- well, I-I don't know if it's damp or not, it-- honestly, it's probably... rotted straight through, by now." George steps forward, towards the kitchen, but Dream stands up to stop George from moving. "*Dream*, you've gotta let me go get the firewood--"

"No," Dream says, his voice a touch more authoritative than he expects it to be. "You-- you should... sit down. I'll start a fire. You should-- make some tea, or something. You have that in the kitchen?"

"I-- yeah, I think," George mutters. "Mint leaves, maybe? Or-or sage. I-I think I have tea bricks? I'm not-- I'm not really sure. Really-- really didn't have much time for tea. Never tasted very good when I made it-- didn't even really like it before then, anyway."

Dream shrugs.

"It'd-- it'd be something warm," Dream suggests softly. "You look like you're freezing."

George sneezes suddenly, the sound loud and abrupt.

Dream nearly startles out of his skin at the sound, and he watches as George rubs at his nose with his knuckles roughly, a shiver running through his whole body.

"I'm not," George mumbles thickly.

Dream wants to be fond.

Wants to say something snarky, lighten the mood.

Treat George gently, handle him with the care he needs in such a fragile state.

But it wouldn't be right.

It doesn't *feel* right.

And George wouldn't want Dream to treat him like that.

He at least knows that much.

So he swallows down the fondness building in his chest and grits out,

"Well, if you say so. I'm gonna start a fire."

George rubs at his nose again, a loud sniff leaving his lips.

"I-- yeah, alright," George replies, his voice somewhat strained. *For what?*

Dream doesn't know.

"I'll-- I'm gonna make tea, then, I-I guess," George continues. "Once-- once you're done. With the firewood."

Dream nods.

What more is there to say, really?

What more can he put in the silence, what more can he *do*?

Nothing, really.

He has things he wants to say, has feelings he wants to articulate-- and yet they stick somewhere in his throat, cloying and unable to come out. Like a dam holding back a tidal wave of emotion,

beating against the wood, waiting for one crack--

Dream enters the kitchen.

If you can really call it that.

It links to the main living room, a motley collection of cabinets, several bags' worth of grains stacked up against the wall and fruit that looks far too dry and far too rotten to be edible.

He swears he can see a spiderweb in a corner.

As he approaches the pile of firewood, he's surprised to find it in absolutely pristine condition. Not even the slightest bit of rot-- and when he reaches out to touch the wood, he finds it dry and flaky against his fingers. Still whole, still intact-- still of use.

*George was wrong*, Dream says to himself. Traitorous words he used to have the bravado to say, to articulate his thoughts and feelings in response to George-- and yet he doesn't feel brave enough now, doesn't feel like it's right and yet also feels so innately frustrated with the way George pulls back, *retreats* from him-- *The firewood is completely fine.*

He takes some of the chunks, returning back to the main room and arranging the firewood as best he can-- the bigger chunks of firewood forming a square with smaller kindling in the middle.

He takes a breath, pulling energy to his fingertips--

*Snap!*

A spark blooms from his fingertips, and he dips his hand down onto the firewood, watches as it catches fire. His eyes water from the heat of the flame.

"Nice," George says softly. "I-- I'm gonna go... get some... water. For the tea."

"Kay," Dream mutters.

He stands up, watching as George finds a worn teapot and two chipped cups, turning away from Dream to collect some water and fetching a tea brick from one of the cupboards.

Dream watches as George works methodically, collecting some water from a barrel set up in the corner of the small makeshift kitchen.

*For a guy who says he doesn't really drink tea, he looks like he makes it easily enough,* Dream thinks.

But there's a lot he doesn't know about George.

He's surprised to find just how little he *truly* knows about the king-- surprised to see that George has erected walls upon walls upon walls to shut away his heart, even as Dream continues to tear them down.

Does he deserve to feel this way?

Does he get to feel that flickering *betrayal* in response to the facts that lay out before him-- the acknowledgement that George still doesn't trust him--

Has George just kept building up walls?

Has Dream been able to tear them down, expose George's beating heart--

Or maybe he hadn't torn any, and he--

Dream's eyes rest on an old sword resting against one of the stacks of sandbags.

Had George moved that sword?

He doesn't remember seeing George move it, but he could chalk it up to not paying attention.

It--

It's a claymore.

His sword of choice.

Why does George have one in his house?

Was this--

George mentioned that his father had a claymore--

So, could it--

Dream steps closer to it, compelled for some reason--

The metal alloy almost sings to him, a strange melody he can't quite place--

He approaches it, kneels down to pick it up.

The golden pommel is heavy in his hand, and yet it feels so-- so *right* . The ridges meld with his fingers in a way that almost feels like it was destined for him-- and yet he laughs at himself when the thought comes to him. He doesn't really *believe* in that kind of stuff-- whether or not a blade could be attuned to its wielder was something that Sapnap liked to tout--

And yet as he looks at it, turns the heavy claymore in his hand and steadies it with his free hand--

He *almost* sees a shimmer of rose gold shining on its sharper, keen edge-- illuminating the filigree vines and intricately hammered designs and runes on the blade--



“What are you doing?”

George’s voice sounds almost anxious as Dream startles, turning around with his grip still firmly on the claymore. George’s hands are slightly stained with the greyish tint of the tea brick, his eyes widened with half-shock, half-- half *what?* Apprehension? Longing? Worry?

“I--” Dream looks down at the claymore.

Silent, burnished metal.

“Was just moving it,” Dream says hastily. “I didn’t want it to get knocked down. Or for it to get wet. You know?”

George blinks, giving Dream a long and hard stare.

Dream waits for George’s response, watches as George seems to run through a few answers in his mind before shrugging.

“I-I guess,” George mutters. “But-- tea’s done. If-- if you want any. I-I figure-- you’re cold, too.”

Dream’s eyes flit to the table, where two cups of hot tea are still steaming, and then flit back to George, looking at his somewhat nervous expression. At his lips, which are parted and trembling somewhat with unknown intent.

It fills him with an emotion he can’t quite place.

“... sure,” Dream replies.

They sit across from each other in baited silence, the only sounds audible being the loud thrashing of the wind and rain outside the small cottage. Occasionally, weak thunder rolls can be heard in the distance-- gaining momentum but never enough to fully crash.

George’s eyes are heavy-set, gazing at the worn etchings in the table. Dream watches as he draws

his knees up and sinks into himself, his expression worn thin.

Dream inhales a labored breath and holds it for a few seconds before letting it slowly slip past his lips once more, willing his mind to stop racing-- for his heart to follow suit. Talking is the only way to get his feelings out, to wean out just how much this hurt. Like a pair of tweezers pulling out a nettle embedded in flesh, extracting the stinging, bitter poison.

*Hurt.* He surprises himself with the term. Dream supposes even he can't lie to his subconscious; and this was a hurt that even he could feel was so, *so* visceral.

The silence thickens, tenses a little-- like a living organism, holding its breath.

And Dream makes the first move, draws the knife that will stab out its pulse--

"George--" Dream steadies himself by starting the conversation. George's stare snaps up to him. A pause lulls between them, and before Dream can continue, he's interrupted.

"I'm sorry--" George blurts. He looks... unbelievably exhausted. Dream's heart squeezes painfully. "I- I know I shouldn't have just left, and I should've told you where I was going but I--" He pauses.

Dream goes to talk during the silence, but George beats him to the punch once again.

"I just-- I had to go," George's words rush out of his mouth, almost like he's scared he'll back out of his own explanation. "I-I couldn't risk losing this--" He runs a hand through his still damp hair. "I couldn't risk losing my home-- it's all I have left of my own."

Dream feels his heart squeeze.

He understands, he really does-- especially when this was George's *everything*. It's an *everything* that Dream hasn't known-- but he thinks he can understand it, if only by a fraction. Like how Dream's life has been spent dedicated to his knighthood-- this is George's *home*. His entire lifestyle was found between these walls, it's only natural he'd fight to preserve it. It's only natural that he would chase after it, track it to the edges of the earth--

And yet, Dream wishes George would let him share in it--

*You could've told me, Dream wants to say. I could've helped you earlier. I would've done it-- without hesitation. No matter what.*

Again, Dream opens his mouth to respond, but George allows the words to fall from his lips without warning.

“Also I just--” George inhales shakily and looks up at the ceiling. “I don't know how to tell you things, sometimes,” He pauses. If Dream were to be so bold, he'd say George almost looks like he's avoiding the truth-- one that might possibly make him seem weak. “It's like-- like I'm afraid you'll snap at me. Get mad at me for what I've got to say, I dunno.”

Dream blinks at him, confusion running across his face languidly. “What-- what does that mean?” He feels incredibly nervous, waves of anxiety drowning him. “What do you have to say that you think I'd get-- get *angry* over?”

George pauses.

His gaze looks conflicted, one of his hands rising up to trace the wood grain patterns in the table, digging his nail into the deeper grooves.

“It's just—” George starts, stops. Shakes his head slightly as if to clear the fog in his mind. “It's just that you're here for your dumb job, and— and I feel like you want to be *more* than that— and— and it's stupid because I don't—”

George pauses again.

Tenses a little, his jaw clenching as if the words hurt him to say.

“Because I don't know you— like-like that, and you don't know *me* like that, and I shouldn't be— *pushing* my feelings onto you when you've made it clear you don't want them.”

Dream's heart stops in his chest for a moment.

He thinks he almost forgets how to breathe—

“Feelings?” Dream asks, his lips moving faster than his brain can comprehend— “What do you mean, feelings?”

He swears his heart stops in his chest-- his stomach flutters with a hope he tries desperately to stomp out.

George runs a hand through his hair again, sharply inhaling. His hand returns to his lap, folds his hands back and forth, back and forth. “I—I want to be your friend,” George admits shakily. It looks like it takes so much out of him for him to admit it— like the words hooked into his chest, his ribs — torn out of him involuntarily. “And I-I *want* to be close. But— it-it just seems like every time I try and open up and-and get closer I’m just... forcing something on you that you don’t want or don’t expect and it—it just...”

George exhales shakily, his eyes fixated on his clenched hands.

“You confuse me,” George mumbles. “Be-because you set all of these boundaries and *do’s* and *don’ts* and-and I can never quite place what’s *crossing a line* for you. And-and then when *you* cross them I’m— I’m just supposed t-to *deal* with it and think it’s *okay* or-or something.”

The accusation is there.

*You’re just a hypocrite.*

Dream bristles slightly, a nasty feeling of pushback rising in his throat.

The hope dies out on its own.

“Wh—” Dream starts, raising a hand. “Are-are you *serious* ? What the fuck do *you* warrant as ‘crossing a line’s then? Because I think we’d have passed that a *good* while ago—”

*We passed that, Dream thinks, when I realized I wanted to hold you close to the point I was afraid to let you go.*

*Because I wanted you to want me.*

*To need me to hold you.*

Selfish.

Selfish, selfish, *selfish* and *foolish*—

*And so not careful, so not careful—*

George laughs disbelievingly.

“W— *would* we have?” George demands. “How am *I* supposed to know *your boundaries* when— when you’ve— when you’ve never *said* them yourself? All— the *most* I’ve gotten is that we can be close but-but not *too* close; we can be ‘friends’, but not *friends*. Like you keep me at arm’s reach so you can just— *push* me away and-and then *chase* again.”

Dark forest.

The thrill of the chase.

Golden eyes.

Dark fabric, melting in his fingers.

*Did you just let him run so you could chase after him, Dream?!*

*I’d never. I’d never, ever—*

Dream has slammed both his hands down on the table before he can even reconcile it.

“Did you think me *consoling* you while you broke down was just— me trying to fucking *KEEP YOU* at arm’s length?” Dream shouts, his voice growing louder without him even realizing—  
“That-that some *distant, arm’s length acquaintance* would do their absolute *most* to make you feel better? Are you fucking serious, George?”

George’s gaze has widened suddenly, and his shoulders draw up to nearly his ears as he raises both his hands, a baffled look on his face.

“And what does *yelling* at me do?” George asks, his voice nearly a whisper. “I-I’m just— trying to *explain* myself—”

Fuck.

This— this isn’t what he wanted.

Why—

What is he so—

Why is he so on edge?

Why are his hands tensed around him, as if he—

As if he wants to *defend* the softer part of himself?

The flower, flickering in his heart, opening to the sun—

“I—” Dream pauses, his lips parting. “I-I don’t know. I—”

He doesn't like not knowing.

Doesn't like not knowing *himself*, the one thing constant—

George's gaze is pitying. Resolved.

"See?" George says quietly. "I'm just telling you how it is. And the way that happens to be..." George's words trail off as his eyes cast to the ceiling, watching as a lightning strike sends light scattering into the dark room. "Is that you only care about me because of your *job*, Dream."

Dream almost doesn't perceive it.

The words leave George's lips like bubbles underwater, and Dream watches as they float away, unaware of their true implications— of what George *really* thinks.

"George— y-you must be *joking* ," Dream says incredulously, nearly hollow. "There's— there's no way you don't understand how much I care about you."

*More than I could ever say.*

*More than words can describe*, truly—

George pauses.

His lips part.

"No, I— I think," George pauses again, as if he's weighing his words on a scale. Deciding how to proceed. "I think I— I do, it— it isn't that I think you *don't* care--"

George wrings his hands uncomfortably.

“I just... I don’t know *why* you care so much. About me.” George’s tone is serious, but not cold. It’s threaded with such a delicate emotion, like the most fragile sculpture of ice dangerously close to shattering. It’s the voice of someone who has already resolved themselves to hurt. Prepared themselves for the sting of the spinning wheel’s needle, prepared for an icy plunge that consumes them whole.

Dream never realized how deeply words can cut-- not until now. He feels like the floor’s been pulled out from under him, leaving him dangling over nothing. It’s nauseating.

“You--” Dream can’t seem to find the right words. “Please tell me you’re kidding, George.” His voice gets quiet as the sentence comes to a close-- like he’s trying to avoid letting the cracks in his broken facade of strength burst and reveal the truth.

“How could I be kidding?” George laughs incredulously. It sounds wet. George’s grip moves to his shoulder, *tightening* , his knuckles going white with the tension. “Why would I *possibly* joke about that, Dream?”

“There’s no way you-- no way you don’t understand *how* I could care about you. How— how much I *do* care.”

“Looks like I’ve found a way, then.” His voice is flat and cutthroat-- the pit in Dream’s stomach grows heavier.

George laughs a little, a mirthless and hollow sound devoid of any joy.

Dream feels bubbling anger in his throat, an acidic and nasty feeling clawing at him, begging to be torn out. His mind spins a little, the nasty feeling rising in his throat as he tries to sort through the strings, finds a thread that finally *tugs*, a hazy understanding of George’s words weaving itself together.

“You-- *George*,” Dream says hoarsely.

“ *What, Dream?* ” George spits bitterly, his words harsh and matter-of-fact. His hands move to clench around the cup of warm tea, keeping his head bowed down to avoid Dream’s gaze. *Look at me* , Dream wants to scream, *while you’re talking to me. See me for who I am. Let me look at you.* “What do you want me to *say*? I know why you’re here, and it’s because the- because the *castle* needs me, or whatever. I already told you I shouldn’t have ran, I *know* I shouldn’t have but I just-- I



can't *help it*-- "

*Right.* George's words from earlier catch back up to Dream-- hit him right in the chest, taking his breath away for a second. He'd pushed them out of his mind to focus on the topic ahead of it, but it finally circled back.

"You think I only care about you because you're the *king*?" Dream sputters incredulously.

"Well... yeah?" George shrugs, his face an impassive mask of forced amicability. The grip on the edge of his cup is hard, his fingers trembling with the ironic effort of remaining still. "You've made that pretty fucking clear. It's like I said earlier, you're all about *boundaries*, or whatever."

Dream's mind suddenly blanks, his lips parting as George's words dislodge something within him, sends his mind toppling into an abyss--

*Holding George close--*

*Cradling his head, wrapping his arms tightly around George's sleeping form as if to protect him from the cold, harsh reality of the nightmares and the dignitaries and everything--*

*Reaching out to steady George with a hand and a word, looking into his eyes to find George's eyes swimming with lost confusion, pulling him back--*

*Holding George's freezing form close, resting his chin on George's head--*

*Reaching out to knot his fingers into George's red cape--*

*Pressing himself against George so tightly, interlocking their fingers together as they danced--*

Boundaries.

What the hell are they worth anyways?

Dream feels something snap within him.

An ember hitting a bed of dry kindling, a funeral pyre being struck by a coal-tipped arrow.

It expands, all at once, and the words fall from Dream's lips before he can even think to rephrase them.

"Are you-- are you fucking *serious* , George? You *really fucking think I only care about you for your position?* "

George's eyes widen imperceptibly— but enough that Dream *nearly* feels guilty.

If Dream was any less reckless a man, he might have apologized.

If George was any less stubborn a man, he might have kept his mouth shut.

But neither of them can pretend to be something they're not.

The pyre ignites.

"Well-- fucking— *yeah! I do!* What else has all this shit been for, if not for that?" George spreads his hands without much intent, his voice becoming hoarse as if he's trying desperately to keep his lungs from collapsing with the weight of trying to stay steady. "All the kindness? The chasing after me? The listening to me rant? The watching me *cry?* "

Dream laughs, the tone incredulous.

"You're *mad about those?* Mad that I've-- I've *helped* you?"

"It wasn't *HELP*, Dream-- It was *your job*-- "

"Don't you *dare*," Dream thunders. His voice almost goes hoarse from how loud his voice becomes, filling the small home with his rage, despair, the feelings that are *too much* and *too little* and *not enough* to describe how everything *is* for him.

His voice cracks a little as he chokes on a sudden sob that passes his lips, his breathing suddenly becoming shaky as he leans forward, slams his fist against the table. The cups rattle, and he has half a mind to try and be careful-- but he grits his teeth, blinks *hard* and tries to force the hot tears away.

Despite his half-assed last attempts at being careful, the cups of tea spill regardless.

He can't find it in himself to care.

"Don't you fucking *dare* tell me that was all only for my job, that all I ever fucking do is-- is *set boundaries* and push you away. Don't fucking sit there and act like me chasing after you was only because Fortuna needed a king. Don't fucking *sit there* and act like me being able to spot when you need an out is *only* because it's my fucking *job*. Don't fucking *SIT THERE* and-- and *patronize* me after you *ran away* without telling me where you were going-- I-I didn't even know if you'd be *okay* or not. Don't fucking-- don't *do* that to me." Dream's chest heaves. His eyes burn so intensely that he thinks that they must be on fire. His throat stings a little, already starting to hurt from how loudly he's speaking.

"I--" George's lips part as if to speak, but Dream won't let him. He can't let George turn this into another mournfest, another lamenting knell—the words pour from his mouth, waterfalls and rivers to erode George's built-up mountains.

"No, George! *I'm* the one that gets to talk about how this is fucking with me-- how this has just been a back and forth since the start; how this has been *so* much more to me but you thought it was, what? Just... just some sick *game*? As if this was all out of some-- some voyeuristic desire to see you fucking *suffer*? " Dream's mind is racing, words tumbling out of his mouth without regulation. Like the river swelling outside George's house-- his feelings slam against the wood and the earth. The dam he spent so long building by hand, securing his feelings behind an iron wall-- it's giving way, *overflowing* . He feels the water fall from his eyes, sickly and hot.

A storm cloud shadows his head, obscuring any rational thinking. Dream's entirely on auto-pilot, his words rolling out of his mouth like claps of thunder, his tears mimicking the rain beating on the thin glass panes of the cottage.

"To see you *hate* it there, to see you break down crying? You think I didn't care when I held you as you *broke*, George? You think I just-- I stayed there because I was *s'posed* to, as if I couldn't have *wanted* to? Is it such a *crazy* thought to you that I might-- that I might *care* about you more than I can-- than I can fucking *describe* to you?" Dream's voice pitches higher as his voice rises in volume, cracking as he forces his words past the lump in his throat, his tears leaving scalding-hot tracks down his cheeks.

Static clouds his mind, forming a bolt he knows will force it all to crash and burn-- yet he can't stop himself. Dream's mind is screaming at him to stop, hold back, take a breath, to be *careful* .

He feels-- like he's dangling off a cliff, standing in a field right before he knows lightning is going to strike. The feeling is all too familiar.

“As if I haven't tried to make you smile and get your mind off of the stress, as if I haven't kept you safe no matter how hard you fought my help, as if I- I haven't spent every *fucking* day with you doing *nothing* but-- but *loving* you--”

The lightning fell.

Static fills his ears, a hint of ozone and leaf rot filling his nose—

Dream's already swaying over darkness-- dancing around the edge of the void threatening to swallow him whole. He feels detached from his body, barely even human. Like he's a ghost wearing a human's face. He's losing his grip on reality.

*What have I done?*

Does he dare acknowledge it?

Does he dare acknowledge his own shade of hurt, his own knife stabbing through George—

He takes a shaking inhale as he looks at George. The fire in his heart burns bright, the feeling of something caught in his throat intensifying as he tries to steady himself. Become softer, something gentler. “I-- I just— I just meant that I care about you. *So much* .” He rubs his eyes with the heel of his palm. “More than— more than I could ever—”

“But— but y-you said... you love me?” George's voice becomes very small, disbelieving, and he almost shrinks in his seat, drawing up his shoulders as if to fend himself from the cold front. From the cold front that is *Dream* , knocking on his door to destroy him, leave him frozen.

He's left with the scorched earth, a blackened reminder of his misstep.

*I should've been more careful around you.*

He shouldn't have opened his mouth—

Shouldn't have *ruined* everything with his words, his stupid, burning desires—

“I--” Dream scans George's face desperately, praying to see a shred of something other than disgust or fear. Something that'll let him recover from this. But George's gaze is unreadable. *Distant* .

Dream can feel himself trying to hastily rebuild his iron walls, fill the holes in with plaster. Trying desperately to keep something, *anything* in, to keep *some* of it secret. Trying to keep his feelings close to his heart, locked away where they belong, away from anyone to see.

But the plaster isn't drying fast enough. The water starts leaking through, starts to rust his walls.

The lump settling at the base of his throat grows impossibly larger. “I didn't mean to-- to say that.”

“But-- but you--” George fumbles with his words. “I'm-- I'm sorry.”

“For what?”

George's mouth opens and closes, like he has words to say but they just aren't quite reaching his mouth. “That you love someone like-- like me.”

“What does that mean, George?” Dream feels his heart strings pull and *tug*, begging him to back out, retreat, stop before he gets hurt even further.

He ignores it.

“Love is just-- it's a bad omen. A hassle? Just-- it's trouble to... to love someone like this. T-To care 'bout someone like-- like me.” George's voice dies on the tip of his tongue.

It breaks him.

The thought that George thinks that Dream hasn't ever had a *reason* to love-- care about him, the thought that George doesn't *know* that Dream would orbit around him forever, would be happy with seeing George as the center of his world--

It *breaks* him.

He's Pluto, orbiting the Sun so distantly--

So distantly that the Sun half-thinks Pluto's bound to have left, bound to have been pulled away by something else--

And too far away to yell that he's there, he's *always* going to be there--

Maybe George likens him to Styx, the smallest of Pluto's moons, so infinitesimally small-- so far away--

*I'm not going to leave you.*

*Not ever.*

*I'll be tugged by you-- by your orbit, forever.*

"It's no trouble," Dream falters, flicking his gaze down to his hands. Boring a hole into the fingertips that, just a few days ago, were glowing gold-- fixing the unattainable. Gripping something he's been chasing after, just for it to slip through his fingers again. "To love you, George. Not at all."

*It'd be more trouble,* Dream thinks to himself. *To pretend like I don't love you.*

He turns to glance back up at George, who's already looking back.

*To act like George isn't the most important thing I've ever been told to protect-- like I wouldn't protect him if it wasn't a part of the job. It'll hurt more to pretend I'm anything less than smitten.*

“Do you...” George begins, voice shaking slightly. “Do you want to forget that happened?”

*It'll hurt more to pretend I don't love you. To act like you don't know just how much you affect me.*

“Yeah,” Dream nods, ignoring how his voice sounds tinny, how his voice sounds *fake*-- how he *knows* George must hear the croak still present in his voice, yet chooses to ignore it. “Yeah. I think we should.”

It feels like dotting the last sentence of his obituary with a period. A permanent mark, signifying the end of any possibilities beyond this.

It's the curtain call on a play he wasn't aware he had the lead role in.

*To pretend this doesn't hurt me.*

And when George smiles feebly, like the faintest drop of dew forming on the thinnest blade of grass, Dream tries to believe that he can hold out.

He can hold out if it means George will keep him around.

Even if it's borrowed time.

If it means he can keep seeing him smile, forced or not.

If it's for George, Dream would burn himself to kindling, reduce himself to nothing.

If it meant keeping George warm, he'd have done it in a heartbeat.

If it's for George, Dream thinks-- *knows* he will do anything.

*For you, George, a thousand times over.*

If Dream was any other man, he might have approached all of this differently.

He might have held back, approached this gently.

But he can't pretend to be something he's not.

And he's never been particularly good at being careful with the things he loves so, *so* dearly.



## Chapter 18

### Chapter Summary

Spirit whinnies a little.

Weiss snorts ever so softly, pawing against the ground.

“Let’s go,” Dream announces.

“Yeah,” George repeats.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

It’s silent.

Well, that’s a half-truth.

Aside from the shifting of the sheets and the pounding of the rain, it’s basically silent.

Dream’s heart pounds in his ears as he watches lightning illuminate the ceiling. He lifts his hand, tries to make out its shape in the darkness-- if he squints, he can just barely make out its outline in the darkness. It’s-- strange, almost. Back at the palace, the moonlight always illuminated the bedroom enough that he could see everything with stark clarity.

The bed’s scratchy.

It creaks a little as Dream shifts to his side, and the fabric chafes against his palms as he pulls the thin blanket higher up his chest.

Is it really better than sleeping on the floor?

*“Get in the bed,” George instructs.*

*Dream watches George's face. His mask is nearly expressionless, entirely automated and monotone as he points to the bed. Dream's head shifts to look at the cot, at its old wooden frame and thin bedding. It doesn't look like it'll fit the both of them-- it hardly even looks like it could fit George.*

*Dream shakes his head.*

*"I can sleep on the floor," Dream argues. "I'm a guest in your house. I shouldn't be taking up space."*

*George's eyes flicker.*

*The first sign of intensity since the--*

*Not the argument.*

*The what?*

*Confession?*

*Is that what it is? Is that what they should call it-- or should Dream refer to it as his screw-up, his one fatal mistake, his Achilles' heel--*

*"It's because you're my guest," George huffs, crossing his arms, "that you should sleep on the bed. I'll take the floor. Or-or the couch."*

*Dream shakes his head again, crossing his arms as well. Stands firm-- or at least, tries to.*

*"That's not fair to you," Dream replies. "Let's-- why don't we share the bed? It-- it'll probably work."*

*George's lips part, as if he wants to say something--*

*But the words seem to catch in his throat, and George closes his mouth.*

*“... fine.”*

It's not working at all.

It doesn't help that every time George shifts, Dream can feel the entire bed creak beneath his weight.

He thought the familiarity of their routine in sharing a bed would make this easier. That returning to some kind of normalcy would make the concept of 'moving on' more amenable. More palatable. But even as Dream mulls over the concept of moving on-- of going back to a mindset where George hadn't really meant anything to him--

He knows he's not strong enough to pull his pieces back, and carry on.

It's a velleity--

A concept that he'll never truly put into action.

Dream tugs on the blanket again, tries to tug it up to his chin.

He wants so badly to pull it over his head, to hide away. As if once the blanket covers him, he'll be hidden from the world's watchful gaze, from the dark that creeps beyond. But that's not how it works. He knows. And as he continues to tug at the thin blanket, he feels a sudden yank of resistance.

He cranes his head.

George's body is tightly curled, pressed against the earthen wall. His hand grips the blankets, fights against Dream's grasp on them.

Dream can't even find it in himself to be annoyed.

He lets go of the blankets, curls in on himself to try and conserve the warmth--

He's not sure if he sleeps.

He dozes in and out of a nondreaming dreamlike state, only ever half-aware of the sounds of the dwindling rain, of the creak and chatter of the house and the world beyond. His mind is plagued by the hints of gold, by the scent of the rain and earth. He feels like he must be *running*, and yet it feels like deliberately wading through a deep river.

He's chasing.

Chasing again, again, *again*.

And yet he *must* have fallen asleep at some point, because--

The bed groans suddenly.

Dream finds himself shocked out of his dozing state by George's shuddery breathing.

"*Fuck*," he hears George whisper. He hears George shift the sheets, hears the faintest sounds of movement.

"George?" Dream murmurs as he turns to peer at George's face.

It's hard to capture his features in the pitch-dark. But what little he can see--

George's face is pressed in a frown, his lower lip quivering as if to fight off an onslaught of tears.

The question leaves Dream's lips before he can even hope to stifle it.

“Are-- are you okay?”

George startles, looking down at Dream with alarm.

“I-- yeah, I’m-- fine,” George mutters, his voice somewhat shaky. “Just-- go back to sleep.”

Dream shifts up in the bed.

George’s gaze is--

*Fuck.*

What the fuck is wrong with him? Dream wants so badly to reach out, cup his face with a gentle hand and tell him it’s going to be okay-- to press a kiss to his cheek, to try and reassure George with some kind of physical affection-- but--

For all his bravado, he’s just a coward.

“Doesn’t sound like you’re fine,” is what leaves Dream’s lips instead. His voice is surprisingly soft--

George shakes his head sharply.

“I’m *fine*,” he mumbles bitterly.

“Don’t lie.”

It’s not that he wants to be harsh with George--

But rather that--

God, what's his reasoning anymore? Does he even *have* a good reason?

... Did he *ever* have one?

"I--" George rubs at his eye harshly, a frustrated sigh leaving his lips. "Look, I-- fine. If you-- *have* to know, it was a nightmare." George's shoulders draw up, nearly touch his ears. "I-- just... *fuck*. It's humiliating. I'm-- 'm not a child anymore, I shouldn't be-- be having *nightmares* --"

Dream thinks back to--

*He'd looked at George, in the pitch black of that night before the dignitaries' meeting that had changed everything. Had seen George's shoulders draw up, tears trickling down his cheeks--*

*Had heard the same feeble lie-- that he should go back to bed, that everything was fine. That Dream shouldn't pry.*

*And yet as Dream had shifted to go back to sleep, he'd heard George's barely-stifled sobs, and had wished then-- so fervently -- that he could do something. That he could turn around, hold George close--*

"I think--"

Dream tries to think of what he could say.

"Well, I--" Dream pauses again. George's gaze is conflicted. "It's eating at you, isn't it?"

George draws his legs closer to his chest, rests his chin on his knees.

"What's it to you, anyway?" George mumbles.

Dream's heart twinges.

*It's everything to me.*

"Just that--" Dream wets his lips, tries not to think about what happened before. Tries to shutter his mind closed, draw his curtains in-- but he can't. All he can think and remember is George's terrified expression-- how his hands had trembled, how he'd tried to withdraw as Dream bore his heart. Thrusted that beating, *bloody* thing into George's unwilling and terrified arms, and watched as George--

He wasn't repulsed, was he?

Had he been?

Was Dream--

"It's *bothering* you, isn't it?" Dream asks softly. "Maybe--"

Talking about things doesn't put them to rest.

Dream knows that all too well now.

But nightmares are different from love confessions, at least from an obvious standpoint. Maybe it'd help George even a little--

George sighs.

"I--" George stumbles over his words, worrying his lip. "I just-- remember falling apart. Really, like-- I..." George puts his head in his hands, as if he's trying to tear himself away from whatever mental spot he's in-- "I..." Dream wants so badly to reach out to George, to hold him in his grasp--

But they can't.

Not now.

Not after everything that's happened--

Dream wonders if he'll ever get the chance to hold George close again.

"I was in," George continues shakily, "a... foggy field. I think. Like, a bog-- I was up to my-- my knees, in the mud. Trying to move forward. It was-- all grey and dark yellow. S-sepia, I think? I-I don't know-- just..."

George loosens his shoulders, lowers his hands to clasping around his neck, his thumbs pressing against the pale column of flesh.

"I-- I saw it," George murmurs. "Through the fog. Shining. Like a hellish beacon."

"Saw what?" Dream prompts.

George pauses.

"I-- I don't-- really know how to describe it," George says softly. "It was-- a horse, I think. A-- a pale, white horse. Just shining through the fog. Walking-- walking on top of the bog, like it was just nothing at all, and-- I remember seeing it and feeling so-- so *scared* . It-- it didn't even do anything-- just... brushed up against me, and I-- I felt myself *break* . "

George inhales shakily.

"Just-- I looked down at my hand, and-- I watched it-- rot. My chest was aching so badly, just-- I was rotting away, after one touch from that-- that *horse*, and it's so stupid--" George buries his face in his knees. "I saw it *smile*. Watched thin, translucent-- fucking *skin* stretch and tear as it smiled at me. As I was being ripped apart."

"Like-- like it was happy I was dying. Like it-- it was *happy* that I was going to just-- rot, in the



middle of that bog-- with-- with no one. To help me. Or pull me out of it. And I just--”

George’s next admission is subdued, hesitant.

“I just-- I was... so scared.”

Dream’s heart twinges as George’s voice cracks.

What can he say to that?

*Sorry you dreamed about a pale white horse, and really sorry that it melted you as you were trapped in a bog. It sounds like a horrible nightmare. And it sucks.*

That’s-- far from what George would want to hear, probably.

“I mean, that’s only human, isn’t it?” Dream says softly. “Sounded like a pretty horrifying nightmare.”

George’s sigh sounds like a whisper of wind against wet, creaking branches.

“I just--” George’s voice fades out falteringly. “I thought I was getting better. At dealing with it.”

Dream doesn’t know if he’s allowed to ask what George means. But George’s grip flexes on the thin sheets, his eyes scan the bedroom. The scent of medicinal *sick* almost grows stronger as George speaks-- the feeling that something’s *wrong* amplifying nearly ten-fold.

“Are you going to go back to sleep?” Dream instead chooses to ask.

George shakes his head almost immediately.

“No,” George murmurs. “I’m-- I need to work.”

Dream gets it, he thinks.

That sometimes, you throw yourself into hard work to quiet your mind. Dream remembers his own restless nights, remembers throwing himself at training dummy after training dummy, burning out his muscles to burn away his mind.

“Alright,” Dream says.

“Give me your clothes,” George blurts out immediately, almost as soon as the reply has left Dream’s mouth.

Dream’s mouth goes dry.

“W- *what* ?”

George shifts out of the bed with a loud *creak* , stretching his sleep-weary limbs. His expression has returned to that mask of monotone automation-- and he fixes Dream with that gaze.

“I’m gonna wash them,” George explains. “In the river. You’re all-- muddy, aren’t you? From--”

*Bitter cold, seeping into his clothes. Mud and dirt building up, caked around his fingernails.*

“Yeah,” Dream answers.

George’s eyes glint with-- is it regret?

Does he dare to ask if George has *regrets*, has words left unsaid--

He doesn’t.

“Well, I-- I have to do something,” George mumbles, more to himself than anything. “So, uh-- I’m gonna wash. Our clothes.”

“I don’t-- have anything to change into,” Dream stammers out.

George bites at his lip.

“I’ll-- I’ll find you something,” George mutters, turning away to the worn wardrobe. It creaks open as George tugs on the knobs, and Dream watches as George shifts through fabric in the half-dark, the faint sounds of linen against cotton, the rattling of the wooden wardrobe. And then George turns back around with a thin cotton shirt and a vest, and a change of pants.

“I-- here,” George says, thrusting them out to Dream. “Put those on.”

Dream looks down at the shirt--

It’s around his size, a bit bigger than what George is currently wearing.

And George’s gaze is half-transfixed on the clothes, as if--

Dream’s not going to ask.

“Alright,” Dream murmurs, untying the collar of his shirt, pulling the fabric over his head. He winces a little as the cold air meets his skin, a sharp hiss leaving his lips as he tosses the shirt into George’s arms.

Thank Fortuna it’s still dark.

It’s dark enough to obscure George’s expression from where he’s standing, so Dream can’t really tell whether he’s staring-- or if he’s disgusted, embarrassed--

“Pants too,” is all George says.

“Give me a moment,” Dream responds with a note of mock-irritation. He reaches for the worn cotton shirt, finding the fabric scratchier than most garments he’s worn-- but as he tugs it over his head, begins doing up the collar-- it feels nice. Almost nostalgic in a way. He reaches for the vest, slips his arms into it before tying the front. “Can you-- turn around?”

“Sure,” George says.

Dream watches as George shifts-- and when his movements stop, Dream hooks his thumbs into the waistband of his pants, pulling them off. The material is already stiffened with caked mud and water-- but he throws the pants in George’s general direction, slipping on the change of pants that George gave him. Like the shirt and vest, the pants are old, worn. As Dream runs his hand down the material, he can feel places where patches were stitched over holes, where threadbare fabric was bolstered.

“I’m good,” Dream says softly into the silence.

“Cool,” George mumbles. “I’m-- gonna change as well. And go... wash these. You can go back to bed if you want-- or you could...”

Dream wants.

He wants so fervently to be with George, to occupy his space--

But George deserves some semblance of privacy.

Some time alone, maybe.

“I’ll-- sleep,” Dream replies.

He doubts he can even go back to sleep.

His mind races with far too many thoughts, his heart beats with far too many *desires*--

“Okay,” George says. “I’ll... go, then.”

Is that a note of disappointment in his tone?

Does Dream dare to imagine that George is reaching out for him--

“Okay,” Dream answers.

He hears George turn, step out of the room. Dream lowers himself back on the bed, hears it creak under his weight again as he rests his head against the thin pillows. Tries to let his mind fade back into lukewarm nothingness, but it-- doesn’t really work.

He can’t find it in himself to go back to sleep.

All he can think of is--

All he can do is *regret* .

Regret his missteps, regret and curse himself for not being more careful when he should’ve been--

He hasn’t been careful enough.

He wishes he’d *been* careful-- wishes that he’d been able to hold George close for longer. But there’s no turning back-- there’s no gluing back broken pieces seamlessly, to pretend like nothing has happened at all. The cracks are still there. Dream squeezes his eyes shut, squeezes in the pitch-dark. Tries to ignore the horrible feeling building in his gut and try to just--

Fuck.

He remembers George’s hands, squeezed tightly around that worn teacup--

His lashes, fluttering like ash and soot, ember and dwindling flame.

Dream puts his arm over his eyes, takes a shuddery breath.

*Fuck.*

Dream's not sure whether he dozes off again.

His consciousness fades into shades of muted grey, the sounds around him fading. He almost feels like his core, his center-- is floating, pulled away from his body. It's a weary dreamlike state, floating between being at the forefront of his consciousness and somewhere behind that.

It's not really sleep, is it?

But what he *does* know for certain is that when he fully comes to, light is filtering through the embroidered curtains.

Dream sits up, finds his body achy. He blinks hard, dashing the faintest hints of sleep away from his eyes as he swings his legs off the bed.

He hears clattering in the main room, and as he exits the bedroom--

George's hand glows faintly orange as his palm presses against Dream's shirt. George's eyes are half-closed, his lips murmuring an incantation as orange heat blooms against the shirt, like veins on a leaf-- Dream watches, transfixed, as the water turns to steam--

George takes the shirt, folds it in thirds-- and Dream watches as George sets it aside, along with a growing stack of dried clothes.

"George," Dream says softly.

George startles, turning around to face Dream.

Dream's heart swells with domesticity, with *longing*--

It sucks, doesn't it-- that George has to be the prettiest man in the world, and Dream has to be hopelessly, infallibly in love with him.

George is dressed in shades of grey and brown-- a thin grey tunic with brown pants. He's barefoot against the cold earth, his hands clenching Dream's green tunic. His eyes flicker, transfixed on Dream's form at the door-- Dream's heart squeezes again as he sees George's tired expression, looks down at his hands, red from scrubbing away at fabric.

"Hi," George answers softly.

His voice sounds... somewhat strained.

George rests Dream's tunic on the table.

"Did you sleep well?" George asks.

"I-- it was... okay," Dream mumbles. "I-- we should... be heading back, I think."

George nods.

"Yeah," George answers.

They speak in stilted sentences, in one-word answers. It's a dance that Dream doesn't quite know how to move to, doesn't quite know the steps of. He's not sure whether moving like this is-- is *okay* or not, whether these steps are the right or the wrong ones. But Dream looks at the sandbags, lets his lips part.

"You want me to start putting these away?" Dream asks.

"Uh-- yeah. Sure," George responds. "I'll-- I can help."

“Okay,” Dream says.

The awkward dance they make, to no beat in particular--

It’s easier to tear things down than to rebuild them, Dream finds. They begin the arduous process of tearing down the sandbags, of putting them back in their storage. As Dream shifts one of the sandbags in his arms, out of the corner of his eye--

There’s a collapsed bag on the floor, spilling its contents against the earth. Dream’s eyes trace up to notice a trail of moisture-- of barely-dried water trickling down the burlap columns.

George tsks, leaning down to gather the sandbag in his arms.

“Does that happen often?” Dream asks as he watches George tie the sandbag closed.

“Not really,” George mutters. “Wall’s usually impenetrable-- I guess the force of the water was just-- too much or something.”

Dream shrugs.

It’s not as if he knows any better about them.

The work is arduous-- but eventually, all the sandbags are reorganized back into the closet, and the house is neatly reorganized. Dream sighs a little, stretching his arms as he watches George stand up from where he’s kneeling at the foot of the closet.

“You got anything in mind for breakfast, George?” Dream asks.

George shrugs.

“Food’s probably rotten through by now,” George answers. “I figure we could just— head back to



the castle... or something. Get something to eat there. I— I'm not big on heading into town— nothing to trade. And I don't— have any coins, either."

Right.

They do have to head back.

"Well, that doesn't sound bad," Dream says. "We could do a lot worse."

"We could," George answers softly.

They fall silent.

Dream cranes his ears to hear the faint sound of water moving, birds chirping, wind rustling. He watches George's expression, watches George's lips part and his lids flutter as he runs his hand through his hair.

George's gaze is fixated on the golden claymore.

"We should go," George says as he watches the claymore. "I'm done here."

Dream can hear the strain in George's voice as George's gaze fixates on the claymore leaned against the wall, can see George's hand strain as if he wants to reach out for it.

"You sure?" Dream prompts. "We're probably not gonna come back here in a long while."

"Yeah," George mutters, tearing his gaze away from the sword. "Let's-- let's go."

George heads for the table to lace on his boots--

Dream watches the golden claymore, watches the faint, pale sunlight play off its filigreed surface.

He heads towards it, lifting up its weighted handle. The blade sings to him again as he turns the sword in his grip, sees a faint trail of gold follow the hammered edges of the claymore's keen edge.

"Are you *sure* you wanna leave this behind?" Dream asks conversationally. "It's a good sword. Would be a shame if we left it here."

George looks up to meet Dream's gaze, his eyes shifting to look at the sword again.

"I-- I think the scabbard might..." George returns to tying the laces on his boots. "Might be in the closet or something, if you want to take it with you."

Dream nods.

He doesn't miss the grateful look in George's eye, a silent relief reflected in them.

Dream returns to the closet to find the leather scabbard for the sword-- it's surprisingly not worn, made out of some kind of high-quality leather. As Dream turns the scabbard in his hands, he finds the stamped mark of--

A clover? How could--

Dream eyes the scabbard, stares at the engraved clover detailings upon the edge.

Dream runs his thumb across the thick leather, his eyes widening as he feels the leather dip--

He examines the pattern-- dots and lines, diagonals and curves that almost seem nonsensical-- but clearly come together to form something purposeful--

*Galactic?*

The ancient language is hardly ever used now, but back when Dream was still training to become a knight, he'd had some interest in learning it--

Dream remembers mulling over the dictionary alongside Bad--

He tries to remember it now, tries to remember what the symbols mean--

*Fortune rota volvitur.*

The wheel of fortune turns.

Why would-- why would *that* be engraved on the--

*Strange.*

But he's not got the time to mull over that. He slips the claymore into its scabbard, pulling the baldric over his shoulder and tugging at the leather belt to make sure it laid comfortably across his chest.

He can't get it out of his mind that this was--

*Made* for him.

But that's--

"No way," Dream says softly, out loud into the silent air.

"What way?" George calls. Dream startles suddenly, a sudden flush coming to his face. Fuck, why can't he just keep his *mouth* shut--

"Uh-- nnnothing," Dream replies as he heads back to the main room. "Just that the-- scabbard for this is *really* nice." That much *is* true, at least. It's a very nice scabbard-- as high quality as the one he uses for his sword in the castle.

“I figured,” George says. “It’s a family heirloom— dad always made sure to take care of it.”

“Your dad sounds interesting,” Dream says as he watches George push up from the table, move towards the door.

George’s steps freeze.

“He...” George says, ever so softly. “He was.”

Was.

“Sorry,” Dream murmurs.

“Don’t be,” George answers. “I— it’s been a bit.”

There’s so much he doesn’t know.

But Dream doesn’t think he *should* pry, should try and pull back the curtains and--

“Sorry, still,” Dream mutters.

“It’s okay,” George assures half-heartedly.

“Is it?”

George turns to him. “What do you want me to say?”

What is there to say? *Sorry that you’re-- sorry that you’ve been orphaned at however old you are right now? Sorry that-- your life has been hard? And that-- I wasn’t here to help you, because I*

*would have, I would've tried to help out in any way I could--*

“I-- don't know.”

George tsks as he picks up a rucksack, shoving their folded clothes into it. He throws it over his shoulders as he says,

“That's just it, isn't it?”

Dream can't help but wonder what kind of point George is making.

It's true, in some sense-- that there're no *good* words to say--

Not without some kind of talk that neither of them are really ready for--

“I guess,” Dream says falteringly.

They don't exchange any other words after that. What else is there to say, really? What words can they use to fill the empty spaces--

*There's nothing, Dream thinks. Nothing that can really-- fill this space.*

Mud squelches underneath their footsteps as they head toward Spirit and Weiss, still tied to the fence. George heads towards Weiss, untying the rope that ties him to the fence. Dream approaches Spirit, reaching out a hand to stroke at their muzzle, murmuring a half-hearted apology for leaving them out in the cold.

Spirit's gaze is baleful.

He supposes Spirit can tell he's not really sorry.

“You ready to go?” Dream asks, looking to George, whose face is furrowed in contemplation.

“Yeah,” George says finally after a pause. “Give me a se--”

“*George?*”

A sudden voice rings out from the silence.

Dream’s hand immediately shoots to the handle of the claymore, his grip tensing as George whirls to the direction of the voice--

“Mags?” George’s voice is incredulous. “What are-- what are *you* doing here?”

In the distance, Dream sees a woman carrying a basket storming in from the distance, a small boy running after her. Her gaze is concerned, somewhat surprised herself as she walks towards them.

“George! Where have you *been* --” Mags demands. “I-- I was *worried* sick! You-- you’d just-just disappeared without any warning one day! I-- when I hadn’t seen you in a *week*, I came to check on your house and you were missing! So I’ve just been-- tidying up, trying to see if you’d come back or not--”

“Did you try and contact the authorities?” George asks as Mags draws closer. George leans against one of the fence posts, a new glimmer in his eyes that Dream hasn’t ever seen before.

“Heavens, no. It’s not like they really ever express *interest* in hunting down missing people-- not unless they’re high-profile, and hardly anyone high-profile lives in Somnium,” Mags says dismissively. “There was no sign of a struggle, so I-- oh, it’s silly, but I figured that you’d just head off on some ‘great adventure’ or something. I took your chickens, too-- just to make sure they’d be alright while you were gone.”

“Oh, thank you, actually-- I’ve been--” George falters. “I’ve been-- so busy that I haven’t really-- gotten much of a chance to think about them.”

“*Busy?*” Mags’s eyebrows raise. “With *what* --”

“Were you really on some great adventure, mister?” the little boy accompanying Mags finally

pipes up a little, and Mags ruffles at the boy's hair.

"Benji, it's Mr. George's private information, he doesn't have to share it if he doesn't want to--"

"Well, it-- it's been something," George answers hesitantly. "I'm-- not sure if I could talk about it, but still."

"You men and your secrets," Mags sighs in mock-offense. "Who's he?" Mags's gaze suddenly fixates on Dream, and Dream can't help but instinctively shrink from her prying gaze. George's face is suddenly pale as well, and Dream wiggles his fingers hesitantly in a half-wave.

"I'm... uh-- a-a close-- friend," Dream gets out.

*Smooth.*

"He's-- a family acquaintance," George corrects.

"Huh," Mags says, squaring her hands on her hips. "That's interesting, because I could have *sworn* your parents never had guests. I talked to them once, you know-- they seemed *very* private."

"I, yeah, you know, private with their friends as well," George stammers out.

"Are you a *knight*, mister?" Benji suddenly blurts out. Dream looks down at the boy's glittering expression, at his barely-concealed excitement.

"I--" Dream glances at George, sees George's sudden shock and fear-- "not really, no."

"But you have a sword, don't you?" Benji questions. "I've *read* about knights-- they always have big swords like that and they protect people, like the king. You've *gotta* be--" The boy presses forward, grabbing onto the edge of Dream's shirt-- Dream snickers fondly, reaching down to ruffle the boy's hair.

"Benji-- don't pry," Mags scolds. "Stay with mom, alright? Come here."

Benji shakes his head fiercely, still looking up at Dream expectantly.

“It’s alright,” George says. “We can-- catch up for a bit, maybe? Let Benji hang out with Dream for a bit. He’s grown up quite fast, hasn’t he?”

“Dream,” Mags enunciates. “What a-- *weird* name. Is it a pseudonym or something?”

“I,” George glances at Dream, as if asking him what to say. Dream shrugs, and George turns back to look at Mags. “It’s a nickname.”

“Weird,” Mags says resolutely. “But yeah, you’ve been gone for-- quite awhile. A lot of stuff’s changed in Somnium while you’ve been gone.”

“Has it?” George asks, his face somewhat alarmed. Dream watches George’s expression, watches it morph into a curious mixture of vulnerability and alarm. Dream opens his mouth to speak, to interject in the conversation and tell George that they really shouldn’t be *wasting time*-- but he feels a tugging at the bottom of his shirt.

“You really *are* a knight, aren’t you?” Benji asks conspiratorially. “You can tell me. I won’t tell mom. Or Mr. George.”

“You shouldn’t keep secrets from your mom,” Dream says, ruffling Benji’s hair again.

“Mom keeps lots of secrets from *me*,” Benji whines. “What’s keeping one from her gonna do, anyway?”

“Oh, bub-- still, she’s your mother,” Dream says, kneeling down to look Benji in the eyes. Benji huffs a little, crossing his arms. “Look, watch this.” Dream extends his palm, pulling golden light into his palm. Benji’s eyes suddenly light up as he watches Dream’s hand, completely transfixed by the golden glow.

“*Woah*, ” Benji exclaims. “Mom’s *never* let me do magic before-- she’s always said it’s super dangerous--”

“Our secret, then,” Dream says softly. “Can you do that for me, Benji?”



Benji nods excitedly.

“Yeah, of course,” Benji says.

Dream smiles, the feeling warm in his chest-- before he blows a breath of air against the ball of light, scattering it in a cascade of golden sparkles. Benji giggles, his voice full of childlike wonder-- and Dream reaches out to ruffle the boy's hair again, a gentle smile forming on his own face.

“Mister,” Benji says suddenly. “When I grow up, I'm gonna become a knight too.”

“Yeah?” Dream asks softly.

“Yeah,” Benji says resolutely. “Because-- I wanna protect people. You protect Mr. George, don't you?”

Dream laughs, the sound a touch sorrowful.

*I do more than that*, is what Dream wants to say. He's-- well, he's *supposed* to be George's confidant. He wanted to be someone George could find solace in--

“Yeah,” Dream murmurs. “I do.”

“Well,” Benji chimes, “I think that's really cool. That you do. And I wanna find someone that I can protect like that, too.”

“I think you will,” Dream says earnestly. “If you work hard. I believe in you.”

Benji giggles.

“Thank you, Mr. Dream,” Benji says.

“Benji! Come back now,” Mags calls. “We have to head to the market.” Dream looks up to see George’s gaze fixed on him-- at his face. George’s eyes glisten with-- are those-- *tears*? His grip is knuckle-white against the fence post, his lips parted with what Dream can only describe as bittersweet melancholy.

“Okay!” Benji answers. He turns back to Dream, leans in close. “I’m gonna work hard. I promise-- and I’m gonna get me and my mom out of here. Like you and Mr. George.” The boy’s eyes are solemn and determined-- and Dream smiles, reaching out a hand to pat Benji on the shoulder.

“I remember being just like you when I was younger,” Dream says softly. “There was...”

There *was* someone, wasn’t there? If not someone, then... some *thing* , right?

But as he tries to assemble the memory, piece it back together-- he comes up empty.

Was it really that long ago?

“I did it for my mom, too,” Dream responds. The words don’t-- feel quite right. Not that Dream *wasn’t* working hard because of his mother-- he’s so sure that his mother was part of the reason-- that his whole *family* was a piece of his own puzzle-- but--

Wasn’t there a bigger part? Somewhere?

His mind twinges a little, but he gives Benji the most reassuring smile he can.

“I believe in you,” Dream says genuinely. “Work hard. And don’t lose that dream.”

Benji nods.

“Okay.”

The boy dashes off to return to his mother, and Mags gives George a kiss on the cheek before reaching into her basket, pulling out two sizable bread rolls and shoving them into George’s hands.

“Take care,” Mags says, her voice half-scolding. “*Eat* something. And make sure to tell me when you’re back in town-- we ought to have dinner or something.”

“Yeah,” George says, nodding. “I’ll-- let you know.”

Mags smiles, before beckoning Benji closer. As Benji loops his small hand into his mother’s, she gives a nonchalant wave before walking back to the heart of Somnium.

Dream and George just stand there, silently, waiting for the sounds of footsteps to disappear.

“What’d you tell her, even?” Dream asks as he moves to untie Spirit from the fence.

“Just-- a bunch of jargon,” George answers.

“So, I see I’m just a family acquaintance, then?” Dream pipes up as the rope falls into his palm.

“That was a *horrible* excuse,” George curses. “I-- *fuck*, we-- we moved out here and didn’t really bother to-- to get to *know* anyone, and Mags saw right through me.” He sighs, moving forward with one of the bread rolls outstretched. “Here. Take one.”

“If you didn’t bother to get to know anyone,” Dream continues, taking the bread roll from George’s hand-- “how did you know *Mags*?”

“She--” George pauses. “She visited me. After she heard-- about--” George sighs softly. “She-- took a lot of time out of her day. To make sure I was-- okay. I-- I didn’t...”

“It’s fine,” Dream answers. “I-- I get it. She-- seems really nice.”

“Yeah,” George comments. “She’s-- she’s nice. I’m glad she found someone, in any case.”

Dream’s not sure why he feels relieved to hear that.

Dream mounts Spirit, looping one of his feet through the stirrups, throwing his other leg across the saddle to nestle his other foot through it. He toys with the bread roll in his hand-- it looks decently hearty-- stuffed to the brim with raisins and dried fruit. He's never been the *biggest* fan of bread like this-- but having some kind of breakfast is better than none.

"Mags's breads are really good," George says with some strain to his voice as he mounts Weiss.  
"Or-- well, I like them, I guess."

The bread's okay.

"Oh?" Dream asks, a sudden hardness entering his voice.

"Jealous, are we?" George asks lightly as he adjusts Weiss's reins.

"No," Dream says far too quickly.

George snickers.

"Don't be, if you are," George says softly. "I don't think I'd-- ever be ready for--" He sighs, dropping his shoulders. "I'm not ready to-- deal with long-term commitment. For a bit, I think."

Dream's heart stings.

*"As if I haven't tried to make you smile and get your mind off of the stress, as if I haven't kept you safe no matter how hard you fought my help, as if I- I haven't spent every fucking day with you doing nothing but-- but loving you--"*

He's fucked this *all* up, hasn't he?

*"Love is just-- it's a bad omen. A hassle? Just-- it's trouble to... to love someone like this. T-To care 'bout someone like-- like me."*

*"Do you... do you want to forget that happened?"*

He can't bring it up, can he?

There's no way for him to--

To *forget*--

He feels like he never wants to forget.

He feels like he wants to tear that memory out of his brain, crush it beneath Spirit's hooves.

"That's fair," Dream says, and prays that George can't hear the desperate croak in his voice, the near *heartbreak*--

"Yeah," George says. Dream watches as George sinks his teeth into the bread, swallowing a mouthful of the hearty grain. Dream takes a bite of his own bread roll, finding the texture soft. It's not quite as soft as the kitchen's breads or even Callahan's muffins-- but maybe it's in a close third or fourth place.

Spirit whinnies a little.

Weiss snorts ever so softly, pawing against the ground.

"Let's go," Dream announces.

"Yeah," George repeats.

Dream adjusts Spirit's reins, tugging on them to urge the horse forward. Spirit immediately jolts forward with hardly any warning, and Dream leans forward to steady himself, his free hand clenching onto the reins to make sure he doesn't slip. Partially for his own pride, partially because it would *suck* to fall into the mud and ruin his clothes.

“Wait up--” George calls from behind Dream.

“Sorry--” Dream shouts, turning to look back at George. Weiss moves at a more stable, casual pace, unlike Spirit, who continues to charge further and further ahead. “You’re gonna have to make him run faster--”

“What if I *fall*, Dream?!” George shouts back.

“Uh--” Dream pauses, shrugging. “Then just-- then that would suck, but I don’t think you will, if that means anything!”

“It-- it doesn’t, not *really*-- ” But George urges Weiss forward, loosening his grip on the reins-- and Dream hears a sudden *whoosh* as George increases speed to run right beside him, to keep pace. George’s face is flushed a gentle shade of pink as a soft laugh leaves his lips, the wind tousling his hair.

Dream wants to kiss him.

Dream wants to reach forward, press their lips together, close the distance--

But he can’t, not just because it’s unsafe, but because he wants to respect George’s wishes--

So Dream will long, like this, from a distance--

It’s not the best thing in the world.

Dream figures that this arrangement can’t last. He can’t keep holding George at arm’s length but desperately wishing for George to build the confidence to close the distance, when that’s all he wants--

The rest of the ride back to the palace is spent in near-silence, with soft gasps or small quips sporadically dropped into the silence, like small stones dropped into a river.

Dream tries to relax into the silence-- but it’s hard.

Hard to fall into the softness of their hushed conversations, when all he feels is the roughness and chafing of his thoughts.

He wants so *badly* to attempt to move on.

But his own traitorous heart won't *let* him, won't let him *let go*--

*I don't know how long I can last*--

But he has to. He has to maintain the charade, rebuild his crumbling walls to the best of his ability, even if it's all a facade. Even if it's all bound to crumble to nothing again, he'll try and rebuild them--

Because that's the least he can do--

*What's wrong with me?* Dream wonders, his hand tensing on the reins.

Why can't he--

Why is his mind so *cluttered*--

Why--

Why now, out of any other point, can he not stop thinking about George?

He's always been able to control his thoughts, been able to regulate his own emotions-- suppress them into a small corner of his mind.

So why can't he reel himself back?

Why is the *only* thing occupying his head *George*?

*It was one slip*, Dream notes solemnly. *One slip and I've fucked myself over.*

It's not like he hasn't made *slips* before, so why is it that this one haunts him so?

Why is he only ever this troubled when it comes to *George*?

The chilled air stings at the tip of his nose, his cheeks, his ears-- he breathes out a small cloud of vapor, watches it dissipate.

The path starts becoming more familiar.

The now-barren trees start twisting in familiar patterns, the path more traveled becoming more clear. It leads right back to--

Is it home?

To Dream, he's not sure.

The castle is his home--

But it's also his obligation, a stack of hefty responsibilities that he's been training to shoulder for his entire life. He's used to it, of course-- but home also is the place he shares with his family-- the quiet cottage they live in on the royal grounds, where he and his sister spent so much time running about on the green fields.

He hasn't been back there in some time.

Not since George entered his life, pushing and pressing against his hardened, predetermined mould.



Dream's not usually the type to get contemplative.

Not the type to reminisce, when there's so much in the *present--*

But as he watches George's expression furrow with anticipation and concentration, he wonders if George has changed him in more ways than just the obvious.

Maybe that should scare him.

"We're back," is all Dream says as the palace finally comes into view.

He hears George sigh.

"What?" Dream asks, turning to face George. George's expression is still in that strange mixture of anticipation and concentration, his lips parted as he takes in the view of the castle.

"Just--" George looks down at his hands clenching Weiss's reins and back up at the castle. "I'm already starting to-- it's already starting to fade away." Upon seeing Dream's confused look, George sighs again, tries to explain. "The comfort. I-- it was nice. Not having to-- to... think. About the-- the palace. I felt more like myself. Like... the real me."

*The real George.*

Has Dream gotten a glimpse of what that 'real George' looks like?

Or has George's true form been hidden away, tucked somewhere Dream will never reach--

Oh, no matter.

"I'm sorry," is all Dream can say.

“It--” George shrugs. “It’s not really okay, but... I expected it.”

Dream watches George’s expression slip into somewhere resembling pensiveness-- and Dream wants desperately to ask what George is thinking, crack open that porcelain shell a little more--

Does he dare?

He’s too slow.

Not fast enough, maybe too careful--

“Your Majesty!”

Bad bursts out of the bright red doors to the palace, his eyes widened with a sense of panic and urgency. He adjusts his glasses ever so slightly, a desperate wheeze leaving his lips as he clenches onto the handle of the grand doors.

“Bad?” George says, his voice alarmed. “I-- what’s wrong?”

“What’s *wrong*?? I-- oh well, gosh, never mind *me*,” Bad stammers out. “Where have *you* been?! I was just considering sending out a search party until Captain *Puffy* told me that you’d been absent since *last afternoon*! What were you *thinking*-- you and Dream were just missing *all night* and you hadn’t bothered to tell anyone where you were going--”

Bad takes a deep sigh, adjusting his tie and glasses once more.

“That’s not the point,” Bad mutters, mostly to himself. “Well, it’s something to *address* , given that you’ve clearly got a habit of running off without *telling* anyone-- but something of greater importance-- Zak-- Skeppy-- is back. And he wants to speak to you.”

“ *Oh?* ” George asks, a note of incredulity entering his voice.

“Yes,” Bad says, a note of urgency entering his voice. “You can-- if you leave your horses at the

front, I'll get Puffy to lead them back to the stables. Ranboo, come here--"

The messenger stumbles out from behind the door, his expression seeming a bit harried, his hair a bit too tousled from running about.

"Yes, Archivist?" Ranboo stammers out.

"Uh-- can you take His Majesty and his knight to-- the medical wing-- Skeppy's quarters, you know--" Bad says, gesturing at both Dream and George.

"Yes, right away," Ranboo says, bowing shortly. "Uh-- Your Majesty-- Dream, follow me."

Dream half-salutes, swinging himself off Spirit's saddle in a smooth movement-- he moves towards Weiss, waits for George to swing one leg off Weiss--

Dream reaches out.

He holds out his hand to George--

George looks down at Dream's hand, and then back at Dream's face--

He looks hesitant.

"We don't have time to waste, Your Majesty," Dream murmurs.

George worries his lip. He hesitates for just an instant, before his and Dream's hands connect. Dream pulls George off Weiss, lets George's body fall into his to steady him--

Dream ignores how he selfishly wants to press him close.

He makes the first step to cross the threshold from the palace's worn entrance path-- into the tiled,

polished floors of the palace's main hall. He tilts his head just a little to check if George is following behind, and relaxes a little once he sees George keeping pace, almost overtaking him as he strides to follow after Ranboo.

"Lead the way, Ranboo," George says clearly.

Back to business as normal.

If only Dream's heart could follow suit.

If he was any other man, it might've been easier to deal with, now that he can throw himself back in his work.

But Dream can't pretend to be someone he's not.

The flower, traitorous bloom that it is-- the beautiful, wicked bloom of his feelings, curls against his ribcage. He'd tried to put it outside of his mind by focusing on the journey back to the palace-- but now that they're back in the familiar halls, the memories of the things he'd said, the harshly soft words they'd exchanged bleed into his vision, stain his mind.

George and Ranboo are speaking, but he can't be bothered to pay attention.

Dream focuses on putting one foot in front of the other, tries to press the words away from his mind.

"... sword, that's a new one," Dream hears Ranboo say. "Dream?"

Dream cocks his head as he meets Ranboo's inquisitive gaze.

"Come again?" Dream asks.

"Where'd you get that sword? I don't think I've seen it before," Ranboo says. "That's-- what I said, yep."

“Oh,” Dream says. “I-- found it.”

“Huh!” Ranboo says. “That’s-- neat, I guess. Not everyday you find cool swords out around Fortuna.”

“Yeaah,” Dream draws out the word, shifting his gaze to George, who’s watching him with an unreadable expression. He needs to choose his next words carefully. “It’s a stroke of good luck, huh?”

“Hm! Maybe,” Ranboo replies. “But, uh-- in any case, we’re here. Skeppy should be waiting for you-- farthest bed, next to the window.”

“Great,” George says. “Thank you, Ranboo.”

“No problem, Your Majesty,” Ranboo says. “Dream as well. I-- I’ll be off then.” Ranboo bows quickly before dashing off, leaving Dream and George standing in the middle of the hallway, right before the threshold of the infirmary.

Dream looks to George.

George’s hands are tense.

“After you, Your Majesty,” Dream says.

He waits for George to insist that Dream enter first-- maybe protest, shirk away. But George’s next words surprise him.

“Sure,” George replies. “Keep up.”

George crosses the threshold, heading into the medical wing.

Is there something wrong with Dream's head?

Why is it that he feels like he's shrinking back, withdrawing-- while he watches George take strides forward, reach out for his destiny--

He can't concern himself with this right now.

*Focus.*

Dream raises his head, and takes the plunge.

## Chapter End Notes

hey! we're back to lucky charm-- thank you for bearing with the hiatus! we hope to be bringing you LOTS more lucky charm content from here on out :]

I'm not sure whether updates will come back to being weekly or whatever, but I've been so excited to write and continue this story. Genuinely :]

---

songs i listened to while penning this chapter

- pico (friday night funkin' OST)
- philly nice (friday night funkin' OST)
- blammed (friday night funkin' OST)
- dadbattle (friday night funkin' OST)
- vs. sayu (no straight roads OST)
- mikrokosmos (BTS: Map of the Soul- Persona)

fun fact, i watched a tjlc (the johnlock conspiracy) tumblr video while writing this

---

Thank you for reading this chapter. If you liked it, throw a kudos, comment, and check for updates on Twitter (follow me on twitter ;]c )

## Chapter 19

### Chapter Summary

“I just figured--” Skeppy winces as he crooks his left hand’s fingers ever so slightly. “I figured I’d be able to fight it off easier.” Skeppy looks away from his hands, and up to Dream and George. His gaze is piercing, though somewhat weary as he leans back in his cot, flexing his still-working hand. “Hello, Your Majesty. And Knight Dream.”

Dream bows.

George nods politely.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The medical wing is bustling with activity. Dream follows behind George as they push deeper into the room, with its white sheets and curtains and the smell of gauze and something herbal, bitter. It’s relatively empty-- Dream supposes that’s a good thing. He’s been treated a few times-- it’d generally been cuts and bruises, the odd fever or two.

He’s not exactly strangers with the medical wing, is what he’s saying.

But he’s not exactly fast friends with it either.

“Hello, Your Majesty,” Dream hears a lilting voice say. Dream snaps out of his own thoughts long enough to register--

Ah, right. Dan, the doctor.

Dan’s smile is wan, his hands somewhat shaky as he pulls his blue-tinted goggles away from his eyes.

“I’m Dan,” Dan says to George, half-bowing. George bows his head politely, a mask of near-perfect elegance. It might’ve been flawless, if it weren’t for the fact Dream can *see* George’s hands tremble, can see the way they tighten against his worn grey tunic. “Pleasure to make your acquaintance-- though I suppose it would have been better to meet under-- nicer circumstances than these. Skeppy’s just this way. He’s-- a little rundown, for lack of a better phrase. He’s right past

this curtain--” Dan pulls back a long white curtain enveloping one of the medical wing’s cots.

Dream hasn’t seen Skeppy very many times.

He knows of the man-- of course. Everyone knows of Bad’s *darling*, in a way. He’s seen Bad and Skeppy engaged in long talks over philosophy, over archival documents. In small, isolated corners in the gardens, where Dream’s sure that the two of them think they’re well-hidden, but far too exposed to ever *truly* be. But to say Dream knows him intimately--

No. Definitely not.

Which is why when Dream finally registers the half-withering man half-lying, half-sitting on the cot, he’s startled out of his mind. Half of his torso is encased in thick bandages, trace signs of purple vines peeking out from underneath the white gauze, crawling up his neck. Skeppy’s left hand hangs limp at his side, and he grimaces ever so slightly as a different nurse-- Lizzie-- checks the hand.

“Skeppy, do me a favor and flex your fingers?” Lizzie asks, her voice tremulous.

Skeppy rolls his eyes.

“I’ve done that, like, ten times already, it’s *not* working,” Skeppy grumbles. “The shit-- sorry, *stuff*, got gunked all over my hand. That didn’t even happen that *long* ago.”

“Sorry,” Lizzie murmurs, her voice dipping apologetically.

Skeppy sighs.

“I just figured--” Skeppy winces as he crooks his left hand’s fingers ever so slightly. “I figured I’d be able to fight it off easier.” Skeppy looks away from his hands, and up to Dream and George. His gaze is piercing, though somewhat weary as he leans back in his cot, flexing his still-working hand. “Hello, Your Majesty. And Knight Dream.”

Dream bows.



George nods politely.

“I would ask you if you’re doing well,” Skeppy says, waving his hand, “but then you’d have to say, *yes, I’m doing quite well, you?* And then you’d have to realize that no, I’m really *not* doing quite well for myself at all. So muffins to all the small talk. We’re not going to entertain that option for even a second. I’m simply going to tell you what I wanted you to hear.”

Skeppy clears his throat.

“I don’t know what you *do* know,” Skeppy starts, “So maybe you wanna start by telling me what you *do* know so I don’t have to spend a lot of time repeating myself.” Skeppy coughs, the sound dry and coarse, rattling through his chest. He leans his head back, resting his head against the pillows of the cot before craning his head back to watch Dream and George. George’s face is pulled into a slight grimace. Dream can’t fathom what expression he’s making on his own face. “I get it. It’s tragic. Now start talking.”

“I--” George’s lips part. He glances up at Dream--

Dream glances back.

George nudges his head, as if urging Dream to speak.

Dream shakes his head imperceptibly.

“Are you done fucking sending silent telepathic signals?” Skeppy prompts impatiently. “Sorry, not-- not fuck. Are you done sending signals, I mean? Like, are you going to talk to me or are you going to stare into each other’s eyes? You’re literally going to do this in front of a *sick* man?”

“Come of it, Skeppy, you and Bad are *always* at each other’s faces,” Lizzie lilts. “Couldn’t stop talking about how much you *missed* him, huh?”

Dream snorts derisively. In the corner of his eye, he sees George struggling to stifle his own laughter, his shoulders trembling slightly. It sends a pang through Dream’s chest-- a hot iron poker skewering the beating, bloody organ.

“*Boo- hoo*,” Skeppy groans. “Me and Dar-- *Bad*’s relationship is neither here nor there for anyone in this room. Now *hurry up*. ”

“I-- well,” Dream says, shooting a glance at George again. George nods. Dream turns to Skeppy, splaying his hands out. “I-- well, we visited Phil at one point, who explained a-- a bit of the basics. That Fortuna’s-- not doing too well. That places are just-- withering. Or corrupting, I guess.”

“Withering,” Skeppy hums. “A prettier term, I reckon. Well, no matter, that’s really about all I expected you to know. Did Phil ever show you my notes? Real wonders of the written word, I tell you. Especially the last few pages, which I wrote with my *mouth* because my arms were in such p--” Skeppy cuts himself off. “I’m spiraling off. Point is-- it’s really looking bad out there. We went to Rotam to take a look, and it seemed pretty contained-- but it also doesn’t sit right with me personally.”

“The site was like a blasted heath. I--” Skeppy sighs, flexing his hand. “I would-- fuck, I would need both my hands for it to work. Let me try--” Skeppy presses his working hand to his temples, a sudden neon-blue glow emanating from his fingers. With what appears to be Herculean effort, Skeppy pulls out a long string of--

“What the fuck,” Dream says.

“Saying that about my memories? Rude,” Skeppy grumbles as a large band falls into his open palm. Upon closer inspection, the band undulates with flashing images, smeared instances of life. Skeppy throws it into the air-- the band widens, expands-- and Skeppy snaps his fingers in another burst of neon blue, paralyzing the floating image.

Dream’s mouth goes ajar.

The sight is-- well, for lack of a better term, *jarring*. They’d seen the image of Rotam from Phil’s end, seen the basic projection of it-- but nothing could’ve prepared Dream to see the more accurate picture, a truer replication.

The entire town is bathed in a sickly sepia-violet light. The sky itself looks paler, sick in the dim light of Rotam’s rot. The grass is dry and cracked, the earth stained with its sickly hues. The houses lay barren and empty, covered with crawling purple vines, seeping into the wooden planks. The trees stand barren, almost bending with foreign force, as if completely succumbing to the sick--

Dream shifts his gaze to see George's face.

George's hand is raised to his lips, his eyes widened with shock.

"I don't know which projection you've seen from Phil," Skeppy says, "because I figure that old man must've shown you one of them-- but this was what everything was looking like before we left. Before I--"

Skeppy leans forward, coughing again. The neon-blue memory flickers, the band suddenly falling back onto the white cot. Skeppy stops coughing long enough to scoop up the memory, letting it melt into his hand.

"What happened to you?" George's question is quiet, faintly solemn.

Skeppy snickers.

"What *happened*," Skeppy hums. "Didn't think you needed that spelled out for you. Beat the dying dude while he's down, why *don't* you. You saw the notes, didn't you? Or well, some of them. Makes no difference, I think. We'd tried to contain some of-- the *gunk*, in this-- vial. Glass one, enchanted to hold substances like it-- thought it'd work. Turns out it didn't!" Skeppy spreads his working hand, and he laughs tiredly. "I was-- well, we're lucky I'm even alive, honestly. Lizzie, bless her soul, managed to scrape most of it off-- but not before it got on me. If I'm *lucky*, we might be able to purge it out before it completely eats me alive-- but if I'm not, I reckon my time is limited."

Skeppy's following laugh is hollow.

"Point being!" Skeppy says, his gaze sharpening. "Bad filled me in. Said that you, Your Majesty, was planning on sending supplies out to the people of Fortuna, especially in affected areas. I'm not gonna say whether you should or shouldn't, since that stuff's honestly beyond my station-- but I honestly think you should check it out."

"Oh-- I, I'm not--" George tries.

"I don't care," Skeppy bites. "I think it's great, you know, that you're willing to stake it out for the people. Stick your own hand in the *business*, for once. Better than that other guy. You wanna

continue that? You can go out and see it for yourself. Get some hands-on experience, you know? I think that'll do you a lot of good."

Skeppy sighs, falling back into the cot.

"If I could," Skeppy adds, "I would go with you. But I can't, really-- not like this. And plus, Bad would have my *hide* if I did. He'd-- ha, he'd yell at me and probably not look at me for a week. Not really-- up for risking that, honestly. Point being, again-- I'll give you a location to check out. Just to see the state of it all. And maybe you could reformulate your plans, try and do *something*."

Skeppy falls silent, his body slumping again.

"I've said my piece, I think. Probably-- get like, a group of people, go check it out. Make a road trip out of it, pave that dirt road with some memories. You don't *have* to report back, but-- as long as you put whatever you see into consideration, I'm game."

It's a lot.

It's really a lot, Dream thinks.

Dream shifts his gaze to George, sees his contemplative and conflicted gaze. George's teeth worry at his lower lip, his hands fumbling. Dream can almost hear George's gears clicking and whirring against one another-- can almost hear the sound of the wheel grinding ever so slowly in George's brain.

George's gaze meets Dream's.

Dream's heart stutters in his chest, catches in his throat.

He hates how infatuated he is with George, honestly.

It's not fair-- not fair that George simply has to look at him for Dream to completely melt, collapse and curl in on himself.

He can see the unasked question in George's eyes-- whether they should or shouldn't--

Dream nods.

"We'll go," George says softly. "Where was the location you had in mind?"

Skeppy grins.

"Uh-- Monitum," Skeppy says. "It's-- Ant and Velvet sent me that name-- it's like-- I don't hear it's that bad, but it's bad enough that the townspeople have fled from it. So I think that's probably a good place to start."

"Alright," George says. "Thank you, Skeppy. We'll check it out."

Skeppy waves his hand.

"It's not that big a deal," Skeppy says dramatically. "I've given you the name, so you all can decide when you want to leave or whatever. I'm gonna rest up."

Dream nods.

"Hopefully that goes well for you," Dream says, his voice taking on a more teasing tone.

Skeppy rolls his eyes.

"I'll be lying here, per doctor's orders, so it'll probably be easy. Get out of here, you two." Skeppy waves nonchalantly, and Dream takes it as his cue to grab George by the arm and begin tugging him out of the medical wing. George lets Dream pull him along, and they trail out of the medical wing in relative silence.

As soon as they pass the threshold, George pulls his arm away from Dream.

“You didn’t have to pull,” George grumbles.

“Well, sorry, Your Majesty,” Dream teases.

“Are you?” George asks, crossing his arms. “Are you really?”

“... No,” Dream murmurs. “Not really, I’m afraid.”

It’s easier to pretend, Dream finds. It’s becoming easier and easier to pretend and paint the lilted smile on his face, his own forced mask of casualness. It doesn’t feel right. It prickles uncomfortably against his skin, creases against his face in a way that just--

It’s all wrong.

Dream supposes he doesn’t have the right to complain.

Not when he’s the one who--

“Figures,” George hums.

What is George thinking?

Does Dream deserve to know?

They peel away from the medical wing with no real destination in mind. Dream weaves through the hallways, turning his head occasionally to make sure George is still following behind. George always is-- Dream’s not sure why he thinks George would leave-- but the insecurity eats at his subconscious, chews deep into his soul.

It’s easier to focus on the familiar sights, on the familiar patterns on the floor.

It's easy to let the sights blur together, a smeared watercolor painting that obscures the truth.

It doesn't feel real, almost-- his feet slide against the stone floors as if wading through water or particularly thick fog. He's got no real destination in mind, no real path to guide his feet. He's being pulled somewhere-- but he's comforted by the fact that George will follow.

Faintly, Dream hears the sound of metal against metal, feels the heat of fire against skin. When he finally comes to his senses, his eyes widen when he realizes where his feet have taken him--

"Dream!"

Dream suddenly feels a force barreling into him, warm and familiar, and nearly collapses to the ground--

"Sapnap," Dream groans. "I *told* you not to pull shit like this--" Dream cranes his head slightly downward to see Sapnap's shock of black hair, and a wide grin plastered across his face. Dream almost feels himself physically relaxing once he sees Sapnap-- he supposes it's a testament to his familiarity, to how the man can just laugh at him and make Dream feel better.

"Sorry," Sapnap says in a tone that's not quite apologetic at all. To his credit, he pulls away from Dream, taking a long look at him. "Nice outfit. Where'd you get it?"

"Uh--" Dream looks down at his dark green vest, twisting the fabric in his hands. He looks to George, who seems somewhat guarded as he watches Sapnap. Sapnap cocks his head, a curious grin on his face. "Just thought it was a nice change."

"Nice change indeed," Sapnap coos. "Well, I think you look *dashing*, Dreamie-poo."

"Come of it," Dream snickers. "Jacobs wouldn't want you saying that."

"Jacobs--" Sapnap says softly, reaching to adjust Dream's collar, "Would probably agree with me. He looks hot, right, George?"

George startles, blinking hard before fixating his gaze on Dream, as if genuinely considering Sapnap's query.

Dream tries very hard not to shudder.

“He’s-- okay,” George says evasively. Dream sees George withdraw, sees his gaze pull away-- Dream immediately latches on, wants to pull George back--

“Just okay?” Dream demands in a mock-accusatory fashion. His mind prickles a little, his tongue weighed down by the words despite his desperate attempt to put a casual spin on it.

“... More than okay,” George corrects. “Is that better?”

“Quite,” Dream responds.

George snickers. A smile quirks onto Dream’s lips, feels the soft squeeze of his heart--

“Well,” Sapnap says suddenly, suddenly driving a wedge into the conversation. “That’s nice and all, but why are you here? ‘M in the middle of something.” Sapnap bounces a hammer on his hip, not hard enough to genuinely hurt himself, but enough to establish a small thump-thump-thumping rhythm. Upon closer inspection, the bridge of Sapnap’s nose is covered in soot, and Sapnap reaches up a thumb to smudge it away. “Sam deferred to me for this commission, and I *really* wanna get this done for him.”

“Uh,” George prompts, looking up at Dream for confirmation to continue. Dream nudges his head.

George falls silent. Dream supposes that’s enough confirmation about George’s hesitance, so he clears his throat.

“Well,” Dream continues from where George leaves off, folding his hands in front of him. “Skeppy’s back.”

“Oh-ho?” Sapnap asks, his voice piquing with interest. “Now that’s new. What’s that got to do with y’all being in the forge?”

“I was *getting* to that,” Dream complains. “Skeppy wants us to go check out this small town-- Monitum, I think it’s called? Said we should gather up some kind of party to go since he can’t come with-- are you up for it?” It’s a bit of a spontaneous decision, spurred on by the fact that they’re already here-- and while Dream knows Sapnap is far too much of a gossip for his own good-- he also doesn’t particularly enjoy being disturbed in the middle of his work.



Sapnap's eyes widen. His hand reaches up to rub at his chin, scratch at the faint stubble on his jaw.

"Uh-- *shit* , man. Throw that all on me, why don'tcha," Sapnap mumbles.

"It's fine if you're-- not down for it," George prompts softly.

"Of course I'm down," Sapnap interrupts, waving a hand. "Just means Ponk will have to take up a lot of the work in my absence. When are we leaving? How long will we be there for?" Sapnap's excitement is more noticeable now, and he leans against a rack, his questions bubbling up rapidly.

"Uh-- well," George hums. "I think we would-- probably leave in a few days' time? I don't want to make any like-- super severe guarantees on that. And we'd probably just be there-- for like, a day at the most? We wouldn't be going there to-- to study anything, I think. Just-- we'd be going just to take a look."

Sapnap hums.

"Fair enough," Sapnap drawls. "Well, I *am* down for that. Let me know like, when you've got a set date in mind, I guess? Gotta portion out the work and make sure I can get stuff done before deadlines n' shit." He reaches out to pat George on the back roughly, and George squeaks, taking a step back.

Dream tries very hard not to find that endearing.

Sapnap reaches out to roughly tousle Dream's hair, and Dream groans a little--

"*Pandas*-- you'll get soot in my hair, you dick," Dream groans.

"Oh, grow up," Sapnap lilts. "But-- thank you for like-- iunno, trusting me? I guess? I'd be honored to go with you guys. I mean it." Sapnap's gaze crinkles with warm gratitude, and Dream can't help but return his smile, imprint as much warmth into it as he possibly can.

"Of course," George adds. "Really."

Sapnap grins.

“Alright then,” Sapnap says. “Well, if that’s all settled-- I should get back to my work. Y’all can head off, do whatever-- canoodling y’all get up to. Is that the word?”

“Sapnap,” George says in a scandalized tone.

“ *George~* ” Sapnap retorts back playfully, a wide grin spreading across his face.

Dream snorts, turning to tell Sapnap to knock it off-- but George beats him to it.

“Oh my *god*, shut *up*-- ” The smile is audible in George’s voice as he lightly shoves Sapnap by the shoulder, pulling a genuine, hearty laugh from the blacksmith.

Dream *feels* it before he processes it-- the familiar twinge of longing, of the wish to hold George close and make him that happy until the end of the world.

He can’t stop *looking* at George. George’s body trembles with the weight of his laughter, the corners of his eyes crinkling as his shoulders shake with laughter. Dream watches as George slumps into Sapnap, nearly collapsing under his own weight. George looks so-- *so* brilliant, a warm beam that Dream wants nothing more than to share, to bask in.

But he can’t. He shouldn’t.

“Come on,” Dream says, his tone far more fond than it probably should be. George nods to Dream, and they turn to leave. Dream reaches out for George, ghosts his hand over the small of George’s back almost out of instinct-- he wants to guide George away, pull George closer and closer--

“Hey, wait-- before you head out?” Sapnap calls to the pair, waving a hand in a gesture towards himself. “Can I steal your Dream for a sec? I have, uh, this *huge* project I wanna give him a sneak peek of.”

George sputters a little, an incredulous laugh leaving his lips as he considers Sapnap.

“He’s not-- he’s not *mine*, so go ahead,” George says, his voice flustered.

*I wish I was.*

Dream crushes that thought out of his mind as he gives George a quick nod, turning back to head into the forge where Sapnap remains perched at a rack. Sapnap’s gaze is mirthful, in an almost shit-eating way. Dream’s so sure there’s no real project Sapnap wants him to see-- but he still goes anyway.

“What do you want?” Dream asks conversationally.

A smirk spreads across Sapnap’s face.

“I bet you wanted that to be you, huh,” Sapnap snickers. “You wanted George to call you his. Your eyes literally glazed over when he said ‘he’s not mine.’”

Dream feels a sudden, embarrassed wave of irritation flow over him. His ears feel hot. He huffs, crossing his arms.

“How do I lose my found brother?” Dream asks, his tone accusatory.

“You can’t,” Sapnap retorts. “I didn’t come with a return receipt.”

“Damn,” Dream says mock-mournfully. “That’s a shame. You seem faulty.”

“Shit, we’re being *snarky* today, aren’t we,” Sapnap says dramatically. He chuckles, wiping at the corner of his eye as he leans forward onto a cart of tools. It wobbles ever so slightly, and Sapnap reaches to stabilize it with a hand. He gives Dream a contemplative look, as if he’s mapping out Dream’s thoughts. Dream feels the back of his neck prickle.

“A penny for your thoughts, Dream?” Sapnap asks softly. His voice swoops down into that concerned tone that Dream knows far too well-- Sapnap’s voice of intervention, the one where he

tries to pry all of Dream's thoughts out of his mind into a messy heap. But Dream doesn't feel like it, not now. He doesn't want it.

"A quarter for you to leave me the fuck alone?" Dream grumbles.

Sapnap shakes his head.

"I'm gonna keep it a *buck* with you, bro--" Sapnap gestures to Dream's general form with a look of "*this should explain everything.*" It doesn't. "I can't."

Dream snorts derisively.

"*I'm* going to keep it a *stack and a half* with you, man-- please learn how to," Dream replies.

The next look Sapnap gives him is one of "no can do."

Dream admires and loathes Sapnap's determination sometimes. It's this exact determination that allowed Sapnap to create his own magic, one *born* of fire. But it's this exact determination that also allows Sapnap to break into Dream's thoughts, into a space that Dream doesn't *want* him in--

"Sorry, dude," Sapnap says. "But when you basically admit to me that you would want your *loverboy* to refer to you as 'his'-- then we've got a problem on our hands. Buck or no buck."

Dream's face heats.

"With or without the *buck*, he's not my 'loverboy', douchebag. He's--" Dream swallows, tries to think. His mind whirls, but he can't think of anything-- "He's just George." That's all he is. That's all he *can* be, to Dream. George is George-- both good and bad.

Sapnap doesn't look like he's buying it.

Sapnap leans forward, fiddles with a pair of tongs.

“Putting a stack and a half on that one-- *cuh-learly* that means more,” Sapnap taunts, enunciating ‘clearly’ with far more emphasis than it deserves.

Dream sighs, running a hand through his hair with resolved exhaustion.

“Is it really that obvious?” Dream asks softly.

Sapnap gives Dream a look-- if he had noticed the way Dream’s voice quivered in nervousness, he doesn’t mention it.

“It’s *you* ,” Sapnap says simply.

Dream bristles.

“And *that* means?” Dream asks.

Sapnap sighs dramatically.

“Means you can’t hide *shit* from me,” Sapnap says. “I’ve seen your fucking *dick*, bro-- I know you on a *more* than personal level. I’ve been scarred for fucking *life* . So I think my analysis of your character is *far* too accurate for comfort. You were this way with Fundy, too.”

Dream makes some kind of ungodly noise in response to Sapnap’s words.

“God, what the hell is *wrong* with you?” Dream groans. His face is bright red now, he’s sure-- he covers his cheeks with his hands, watching Sapnap’s grin nearly turn wicked. “What’s your *point*, Sapnap?”

Sapnap shakes his head.

“The point is that you are down *bad* for that boy, I swear,” Sapnap teases. “All he has to do is like, fucking, what-- flash you a pretty-boy smile and you get on your hands and knees?” Sapnap snickers, clearly too pleased with himself. "Simp."

Dream sputters.

“*Listen*,” Dream says.

“Listening,” Sapnap hums, raising an eyebrow. “Talk fast. Pip-pip, cheerio-- or something.”

Dream gives Sapnap a look. Sapnap wisely chooses to shut his mouth.

“I *know*, alright?” Dream sighs softly. “I do. I-- I wish I could shut off my brain or-- or something. It’s just--” Dream wrings his hands, his eyes resting on the soot-stained earth. “I’m going to be real. I don’t want to talk about this-- not right now, at least.”

Sapnap’s brow furrows.

“I-- fair enough, I guess-- but are you going to be alright?” Sapnap asks, his voice slightly concerned.

Dream peers through the forge’s machinery, watching George standing by the entrance with all the grace of a swan on land, swinging his arms behind his back, shifting on one foot to the other as if he can’t reel in his own anxious energy. Dream feels lovesick.

“Yeah,” Dream says, his voice almost dreamy, for lack of a better word. “Yeah, I’ll-- I’ll be fine. Don’t worry about me.”

Sapnap sighs dramatically.

“You’re my bro. My *brother*, Dream. I can’t just stop worrying about you because you told me not to. I thought something was off, that’s why I pulled you in here,” Sapnap explains. He wrings his hands-- Dream watches as Sapnap spins a small promise ring on his left hand’s ring finger-- a brilliant amethyst gem nestled in a silver band. “Look. I’m not going to lecture you about it-- since you’re unreasonable in that way, but... just. I worry. Regardless.”

Dream punches Sapnap in the arm lightheartedly, snickers at Sapnap's scandalized expression.

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Dream says, his voice a touch more sincere. "I know you nag because you *looove* me and are worried for me or whatever." Dream laughs a little, rubbing at Sapnap's arm. "I appreciate it though, really. I'll-- I'll be fine, I'm just--" He lowers his head, tries to think. "I think I'm really just-- down bad."

Sapnap gasps dramatically.

"*Hoooly shit*," Sapnap says in mock-surprise, pressing a hand to his chest. "Dream's finally realized he's down *bad* for *pretty boys*? F--Fortuna *bleess* his frail little heart, how's he going to *handle* that--" Sapnap's chuckle sounds stifled, as if he's trying really hard not to completely collapse with the weight of his own laughter. His face falls slightly as he takes a more serious look, stares *into* Dream. "Look, as long as you like-- reason it out or something, I think you're going to be fine. We're not kids anymore. But please-- *promise* me you'll come to me if you need anything."

Dream nods.

He holds out his pinky to Sapnap, stretches it across the small expanse between them.

"Cross my heart and hope to die, I promise," Dream says softly.

Sapnap smiles, reaching out to intertwine their pinkies. It's warm. Softly quiet.

"Now dude," Sapnap says seriously. "That's a pinky promise. Better not be breaking it, or I will break your bones."

"Only my pinky bones," Dream responds.

Sapnap shakes his head.

"No, *all* of 'em," Sapnap says, his tone still serious.

“Oh, goodness me, how *scary*, ” Dream teases, pretending to shudder in fear. Sapnap snickers, shoving Dream lightly.

“Don’t get all *cheeky*, Dream,” Sapnap says softly, reaching out to pat Dream’s shoulder. Sapnap’s hand feels warm, almost erring on the side of burning. It reminds Dream ever so faintly of the past-- of that moment where Sapnap scorched Dream’s back. It’s-- almost nice. “Look, I’m not gonna keep you here much longer. Go back to him.”

“Yeah, I--” Dream starts, but a soft voice interrupts through the chaos and the din--

“Dream? Are you almost done?” George’s voice is hesitant, slightly tremulous. Dream can feel the soft smile creeping on his face, and he turns to Sapnap, tipping his head.

“See? Duty calls,” Dream says softly.

Sapnap yawns dramatically, stretching a little.

“Ooh, *get it*, I guess,” he says. He snickers, waving a little. “See you later, Dream. Or well, when we head off to Monitum, I guess we’ll be seeing a lot of each other.”

Dream nods.

“Sounds like a plan-- see you then, *douche*, ” Dream says with a smile on his face.

Sapnap scoffs.

“Dick. See you fuckin’ later. I’m not looking forward to it all or anything,” Sapnap responds, casting his gaze to the ceiling.

Dream snorts, rolling his eyes.

“Oh, yeah, totally not,” Dream teases. “Not like you literally love me like a brother or anything.



Totally not.”

“I love you like that little brother that wants to kick his older brother off a roof so he can inherit all his shit,” Sapnap responds.

“If you *really* wanted to do that, you would’ve done it before I became super strong during training,” Dream says. Sapnap bursts into raucous laughter, falling forward with a chuckle.

“Yeah, you’re right. Come on, now, *get*. Shoo. I have to get back to work,” Sapnap says, picking up a pair of tongs from his cart. “Ponk’s going to be up my ass about it if I don’t.” Dream watches Sapnap retreat back into his more no-nonsense persona, the one that lets him get focused on his work.

Dream nods.

“Alright, alright, fair,” Dream says cheerfully. “George’s going to get pissy--”

“Ooooooooo,” Sapnap teases. Dream shoots Sapnap a look, and Sapnap falls silent.

-- if I make him wait too long,” Dream continues, as if Sapnap hasn’t said anything at all. “See you later, Sap.”

Sapnap nods, wiggling his fingers at Dream.

“See you later, Dreamie-poo,” Sapnap says, his voice lilting a little.

Dream rolls his eyes fondly.

“Mhm,” Dream says, turning to leave the forge and rejoin George.

Dream tries to stifle the way his heart skips when George’s face brightens when Dream draws near.

“You’re back,” George says softly, as if he’s seeing Dream for the first time in a long while. Dream laughs, rubbing at the back of his neck.

“I mean-- yeah,” Dream says. Pause. “Do you-- you wanna head back? To our room?”

George nods, humming contemplatively.

“Yeah, I’m a bit wiped,” George murmurs, running his hands against his grey tunic. He begins to walk back towards their shared quarters, Dream following close behind. “I should probably apologize to-- Eret, at some point. Actually.”

“Why’s that?” Dream asks softly.

George laughs.

“I-- I dropped the cape. In mud, I think. Yesterday,” George murmurs. “I don’t think they’ll be happy with me.”

It was yesterday. Only *yesterday*.

How does that make any sense at all?

“Well, I mean-- Eret’s pretty forgiving,” Dream responds. “I’m sure they won’t be that mad.”

“Mm... fair enough,” George replies. They fall into a wordless silence. It’s somehow comfortable, and Dream watches dust motes float through the palace’s air, landing against the tiled floors.

Dream feels lighter, somehow. He needed Sapnap’s banter to steady his mind, be a small voice of cheerful reason amidst the fog. They’ve been friends-- basically *brothers*, for so long that Sapnap knows Dream like the back of his own hand, and vice versa for Dream. He’s never been more glad for it now, happy that Sapnap can pull him out of his own mental fog.

“So,” George says as he rests a palm against the light blue doors to the bedroom. “What *did* Sapnap show you?”

Dream feels a sudden spark of panic.

“Oh, just a knife,” Dream lies. “It was-- pretty neat. It-- had this, little vial-- to store poison in it? That was-- pretty cool, honestly. He was talking me through all the details.”

Dream’s never been the best liar-- in fact, he’d say he’s pretty fucking godawful at it.

George’s gaze is doubtful, but after a moment he shrugs and pushes open the door to the bedroom.

Dream feels a sense of fervent relief-- at least George’s never been good at picking up on lies.

“Fair enough,” George says.

They banter for a bit-- their words empty and half-meaningful, half-meaningless-- Dream desperately wishes he could grasp for more meaningful words-- *ask* George about what happened yesterday, about what it means for them-- but he can’t. Does he dare to? Does he dare to disrespect George’s desire to keep all of this silent, under wraps?

He doesn’t.

As they retire to bed, Dream’s mind starts to race again. George falls asleep almost immediately-- he can tell by the way George’s breathing slows, evens out-- how his body nearly sinks into the mattress. Dream can’t find it in himself to blame him, because George has to be exhausted from everything--

But Dream can’t sleep. His body won’t let him rest. His body buzzes with energy, his fingers tingling and his mind racing.

So he sits up.

He looks down at George's sleeping face-- at the way he looks so *peaceful*--

"Sorry," Dream whispers, before he swings his legs off the bed and gets up. He hisses softly at the feeling of his bare feet against the cold floor, but he pushes past it to toe on his shoes, tie up his belt. He has to leave, he thinks. Find some way to get rid of his energy.

As soon as the thought occurs, he knows where he wants to go.

Dream hasn't had late night training sessions in a long while.

He used to do them frequently-- used to vent out his energy through his fists, through working his body to its limits. He'd crawl back to bed, his body completely spent-- but sated. His mind quieted. If that's what it takes-- then he'll do it.

Dream enters the training barracks quietly.

It's empty.

He doesn't know what he expected-- did he expect it to be bustling? Full of activity? Busy with his peers in training-- or even in the same situation as him?

He's not too sure, but he doesn't dwell on it.

Dream walks to the corner with the training dummies, dragging one out into the center of the room. After adjusting it, he takes a step back to let out a soft sigh-- he rolls his shoulders in an attempt to force relaxation. He steps into a loose stance, breathing out for one second before slamming his fist against the dummy.

It sends a wave of shock down his arm-- he flexes his fingers, readying his fist before slamming into the dummy again. He'd been unprepared for the resistance-- but he doesn't mind the pain. He thinks he wants it, *needs* this pain as a reminder.

It's like that for awhile-- he slams his weight against the dummy, practicing his strikes against the smooth surface, keeping his strikes even so as to not cause blisters to erupt across his knuckles. He

strikes away his thoughts, his *mind* --

His punching session is interrupted suddenly with the sound of clapping.

Dream lifts his head to see Technoblade standing next to the door, sarcastically applauding. His hand movements are painfully slow and deliberate, his gaze impassive as he watches Dream. Techno doesn't seem to be exhausted-- though Dream supposes that Techno never looks exhausted by *anything*, even late at night. He does seem somewhat amused at the sight of Dream, though.

"Last time you were up this late was the day before the exams," Techno says conversationally.

Dream grimaces, his fist connecting with the wooden dummy again, the sound reverberating through the air. He doesn't want to talk to Techno. No disrespect, no hatred-- just that Dream has never really felt the need to talk to Techno, to connect with him.

"Hey Techno," Dream says, his voice strained as he punches the dummy again. "What do you want?"

Techno 'tsks.'

"Maybe you aren't pickin' up what I'm puttin' down, Dream," Techno says. "What's got you up this late?"

Dream snorts.

"I'm very much picking it up," Dream retorts. "I just don't feel like answering much right now." *Thud*. Dream's grip strains against the wooden surface, his knuckles turning near-white.

"Mm, is that so?" Techno's voice is conversational, but with a slight edge to it. "I wouldn't say that to the head of the royal guard." He hums softly, the sound prickling the back of Dream's neck. "You know, Puffy came to see me the other day."

Alarm runs through Dream for a split second.

He pretends to be casual, sinking his fist into the dummy again.

“Oh?” Dream asks as he readjusts his stance, strikes again. “What’d she need?”

“She came to see me about a runaway king and his knight,” Techno says, his voice hardened now. Pointed. Targeted.

Dream takes a step back.

“Huh,” Dream says, even as his voice nearly shakes. “Wonder who that could’ve been.”

Techno snorts derisively.

“Playin’ dumb really isn’t a good look for you, Dream,” Techno says. Dream near-growls, slamming his fists into the dummy, letting his hands slide down the smooth surface.

“Y’know, Techno,” Dream says, “I *just* said I don’t wanna talk about this. I came *here* to *avoid* thinking about it, actually.”

“Well, personally, I don’t feel like lettin’ you off that easy. Not *thinking* about whatever this problem of yours is isn’t going to fix it,” Techno replies. He pauses, as if wondering what to say next. After a moment, he speaks. “So, what is it about him?”

Dream pauses.

“What-- what do you mean?” Dream asks cautiously.

“Clearly it’s *something* about the king, isn’t it?” Techno asks matter-of-factly. “You’re the talk of the castle, you and him.”

*Talk of the castle.*

Dream has always known that the castle has eyes and ears in the walls. Eyes, ears, *hands* . Everyone sees and knows all, and you'd be hard-pressed to keep an actual secret-- not unless you resorted to desperate measures to erase knowledge of it.

But still, he's surprised *he* hasn't heard the words.

"What?" Dream asks.

He hears Techno take a sharp inhale.

"Are you playing dumb, or did you genuinely not know?" Techno asks. Dream lets the words wash over him, lets them settle before he turns around to face Techno fully. Techno's gaze is still as impassive as ever, his brow subtly furrowed.

"No, I-- I genuinely, didn't, I think," Dream says falteringly. "What-- what are they *saying* ?"

Techno shrugs noncommittally.

"They say a lot," Techno hums. "I'm not personally vested in hearsay." Techno pauses, regarding Dream with a look. Dream has never liked the way Techno watches him-- as if he's something to be studied, dissected. Something to be taken apart ruthlessly. "What do *you* think they're saying about you two?"

Dream shrugs with a forced nonchalance.

"I-- I'm not really sure if I-- want to know. If I'm being one-hundred percent honest here," Dream replies.

"Fair. But I want to hear it from you," Techno hums as he strolls over to a wall with mounted swords, picking one up from the wall. "What does he *mean* to you?"

*It wasn't HELP, Dream-- It was your job--*

*You think I only care about you because of your fucking position?*

Is that how the palace sees him and George?

Does he bluff? Does he lie?

“Well, he’s-- a friend, at the very least,” Dream says. “He’s my job. A mission. A quest. You know how it is.” The words-- the *lies* stick unpleasantly in his throat. It’s almost nauseating.

Techno doesn’t look convinced.

“Is that so?” Techno asks. “Your footing’s off, and you’re bristling far too much from a simple, uncharged question-- so I reckon you are *far* more upset about this than you would be if you really believed what you were saying. I’m not dumb. Give me an answer.” His voice is commanding at this point-- and Dream doesn’t know what to say.

He shuts his mouth, tries to stifle the instinct to immediately respond to Techno’s command.

“What’s it to *you* ? Why do *you* care?” Dream asks, his voice accusatory. “You’ve never been one for gossip.”

“I don’t much care, you’re right,” Techno hums. “I’m just saying--” Techno lifts up the sword, unsheathing it to watch the blade glisten in the pale moonlight. “Whatever it is you’ve got there, it’s clearly eating at you, is it not? Things like that tend to put-- rifts between lieges and vassals. But it’s not just about what changes between you two personally-- it’s about the outreaching effects to the kingdom as a whole.”

Dream pauses.

“So-- so you-- you only want to listen, for-- for the sake of the kingdom?” Dream asks hesitantly.

Techno sighs deeply.



“Let me level with you, Dream,” Techno says. He reaches back behind his head, slowly tying up his hair into a ponytail. “I’m not good at-- all that interpersonal nonsense. It’s a headache. A hassle.”

*Love is just-- it’s a bad omen. A hassle? Just-- it’s trouble to... to love someone like this. T-To care ‘bout someone like-- like me.* Dream shuts off his mind, tries to forget.

“I won’t judge you and whatever you’ve got going on there. My ear is here for you, if you want to chat into it-- but I’ll give you advice as I see it.”

Techno lowers his hands.

“I’m not going to pity you. I’m not going to try and let you wallow in your own misery,” Techno says sharply. “But I am here, if you want to talk.”

Dream feels a sudden exhale leave his lips-- he wasn’t even aware he’d been holding his breath in the first place.

“Okay, I--” Dream starts. He pauses for a second, considers his options. If-- if he confides in Techno, lets go of his thoughts-- is it as easy as just-- is it *really* just as easy as confiding in Techno like this? Would Techno use this as some kind of leverage over him-- “You promise it won’t leave this room?”

“Yep,” Techno says simply.

“Alright, well,” Dream says, feeling a pinch more relieved-- “I--” His hands are sweaty as he rubs his thumbs together, tries to steady himself. “I-- seem to have... fallen. For the king.”

Now that the words are out there, they feel much more intimidating.

Acknowledgement of it-- of *this*--

It scares him.

“... I see,” Techno says.

What kind of a response is that?

Dream swallows.

“... Yeah, I-- it’s... not doing too well,” Dream says, the words becoming harder to tear from his throat. “On my mind.”

Techno sighs.

“I can tell, Dream. You wear your heart on your sleeve.” Techno leans against his sword, humming low. He watches Dream with that *same* goddamn stare-- that calculating, penetrating stare. “Does he know?”

Dream draws his mouth into a line.

“Uh-- no... no comment,” Dream says awkwardly.

Techno looks duly unimpressed.

“So he does,” Techno says, his voice monotone. “And let me guess, he wasn’t too keen?”

“God, it-- it was an *accident*, and he’s pretending like it didn’t even happen,” Dream groans. “But it *so* clearly did!”

Techno hums, the tone more contemplative.

“I feel like that’s the right thing to do,” Techno says. He lifts his sword, splaying it open in his

palm. It catches the light-- it's not bright enough to be blinding, though. "Feelings can't get in the way of the job. Especially yours."

"Fortuna, don't I know that already," Dream sighs exasperatedly. "I could preach to the *choir* about that one, Techno. It's just--" He sighs again, kicking his foot against the ground. "I'm not built for this, I think."

Techno shrugs.

"None of us are built for the role we're expected to play, Dream," Techno sighs. "I don't care much, really. For this job. But I do it regardless. Perhaps it's a perverted sense of duty-- but the-- the point I'm trying to get at here, is that-- you've established it then. The king means a lot to you." He pauses, as if considering how best to formulate his next statement. "So that puts you in a dangerous situation, does it not?"

Dream feels a wave of irritation spark through him-- he doesn't want to be addressed like he's a *child* -- he *knows* --

"I *know* it does, Techno-- I fucking *know* that, alright?" Dream snaps. His chest heaves-- he's not sure why this makes him so angry-- why it pushes his buttons as much as it does-- no. He can't play dumb about that one. He does know. He knows that he wants to be childish, he *wants* to throw a tantrum and scream that this isn't *fair*, that it's not fair that he can't call George *his*-- but he can't.

"Sorry-- just--"

Dream rubs at his eyes roughly, swallows the lump forming in his throat.

"God, I'm such a shitty knight, aren't I?" Dream asks weakly.

"You're human," Techno responds quietly.

Dream scoffs.

"Obviously. We *all* are," Dream says, his tone almost dismissive. What's the point of highlighting that, anyways? A comment about how fallible humans are? About how emotional and fickle everyone is?

“... Sure,” Techno says evasively.

Oh, he doesn’t have enough time to question it. To care about why Techno would choose to be evasive about *this*.

“The point I was going to make is-- do you-- do you *really* get it?” Techno adds, spreading his hands. “Like-- obviously, hypotheticals here-- say you’re in the heat of battle, defending the king. Say the enemy captures the king and uses your affection for him against you. What will you do? What happens, then-- when your own hesitance and feelings-- gets him killed?”

Dream feels a wave of cold rush down him, pass through his fingertips.

“I-- I don’t know,” Dream answers.

He doesn’t. He really doesn’t. He hadn’t thought of that-- hadn’t thought as drastically as Techno seems to do so easily.

“Dude, just-- I-- listen, I’m pretty good at keeping this under wraps, I think,” Dream says quickly. “This is-- this is just a recent thing. A small detour from the path more traveled.”

“See, you say that-- but word gets out,” Techno says impatiently. “If the entire castle’s already talking about it-- how long do you think it’ll be before it reaches people that want to do serious harm? You need this to reach an actual *resolution*, Dream.”

Dream feels the wave of cold dread give, turn into fiery irritation.

“I don’t fucking *have one*, alright? I don’t know *when* I’ll have one! This isn’t any of your *fucking business*, Techno!” Dream snaps.

Techno’s eyes widen for a split second before they narrow again, his voice suddenly showing a fraction of anger.

“It is *everyone’s* business when the kingdom could be put in danger *because of your actions*, Dream. You think this is just about *your* story? It’s *everyone’s*, ” Techno retorts.

“Don’t you *dare* talk to me as if I haven’t put my *everything* into this kingdom,” Dream shouts. “I trained since I was basically old enough to fucking *walk*, Techno. I’ve worked for this position, worked to be where I am because I wanted to protect people-- in the *name* of Fortuna-- and it’s been years and years of pain and *working myself to my limits*. ”

His anger tears itself from his throat, sharp claws with killing intent-- his anger falls from his lips, burning and acrid, almost like bile. He knows why he’s so angry-- why he’s so *defensive*. He’s hiding his pride, shielding the soft thing with hardened walls of indignation.

The words tumble from his throat, as if fighting to be *spoken*, to be *heard*. They’re unrefined and nearly nonsensical.

“You didn’t have to come here and tell me-- and *tell me* I’m suddenly endangering everyone. You didn’t even have to fucking-- *listen* to me-- but now that you *have* all you want to do is tell me that I’m suddenly *bad* and *wrong* -- I don’t *CARE* if it’s everyone’s fucking story. I’m fucking-- I’m fucking *tired* of having everything I feel be *stomped over* like this when it isn’t even dangerous. It isn’t *fair*, Techno.”

Techno clicks his tongue.

“If you genuinely think it’s that unfair, then you shouldn’t have become a knight in the first place,” Techno says, voice laced with a tamed venom. Dream hates the way Techno looks completely unphased. Hates the way Techno looks *down* on him, condescends him. *You are no better than me*, Dream wants to shout. *So stop acting like it*. “You know what we signed up for. For the Kingdom of Fortuna, all else is placed to the side. The kingdom is the ship-- the people are its crew. One crew member could cause the death of the *entire ship* and its people, Dream.”

Dream grits his teeth.

“Just because I wanted to be treated as a person doesn’t make me *faulty* or *dangerous*, Techno. I’m a *knight*, ” Dream says. He places his hand to his chest, clenches the fabric of his shirt to the point it might tear. He’s human. His heart pounds desperately, fluttering against his ribcage. “ Not just some unfeeling cog, part of some big machine.”

“That’s not my point, Dream,” Techno argues. “The point is that--” Techno pauses, seems to

grapple for words. As if he's reaching for the right thing to say, but coming up empty. Are there any words for this? Are there the *right* words for this? "Being part of this kingdom-- this living, *breathing* organism-- requires each part to do its *utmost*. To protect the king. To protect the people. Your feelings-- while not wrong, while not *dangerous* on their own-- could have unforeseen consequences. And you should acknowledge that instead of trying to avoid it. You should *work* on it instead of telling me you don't have it figured out. *Figure. It. Out.*"

Techno turns on his heels-- Dream faintly hears a sharp exhale, as if Techno is attempting to relieve some kind of tension. Dream feels a sharp stab of vindication-- finally, Techno lowers his veneer long enough for Dream to realize that Techno, too, is *angry*.

"I don't care *what* you have to do to solve it, but find *a* solution."

Techno returns to the wall to mount his sword, strolling towards the door to the barracks.

"And, Dream?"

Dream doesn't raise his head. His hands are *shaking* with the amount of force he needs to hold still, maintain his composure.

"Good luck out there, in Monitum. I hear there's bandits."

The door slams shut.

Dream's mind explodes.

*It isn't fair, it isn't fucking fair. This hasn't been fair from the start*, Dream thinks. He can't escape the maelstrom of his own mind, this all-encompassing, all-consuming *beast* that drags him down and threatens to leave him bristling. *All I've done is show nothing but absolute loyalty-- show the fact I've been ready to put my life on the line and risk it all for the kingdom since I knew how to think for myself. But the one time I want to just-- think-- finally want something for myself-- I'm dangerous, I'm not keeping the people in mind, I'm selfish--*

*Fuck this. Fuck all of this--*

Dream's fist collides against the training dummy's wooden, impassive face. The dummy wobbles ever so slightly, and Dream feels his frustration spike. Pulling all of his energy into his hand, he watches as his hand glows orange, nearly blood-red-- and he slams his fist into the wooden dummy's chest, sending it flying across the room in a wave of splinters and broken intent.

The resulting *thud* is horribly resonant. It rings dully in his ears.

Dream feels his rage subside enough to realize that in the midst of his outburst-- he'd broken the dummy's neck. It lays against the ground, a collapsed reminder of his frustration.

*What the fuck is wrong with Techno?* Dream thinks, the thought still heated ever so slightly. *Why did he feel the need to talk to me like that? Who the fuck does he take me for?*

Techno's strangely-worded threat-- warning, lays in his mind.

*I hear there's bandits.*

Dream's fist tightens.

*What the fuck is wrong with me?*

He can't let his rage consume him like this. He can't be acting *out* like this. That's not who he is-- that's not who he *wants* himself to be. So he walks forward, leans down to pick up the dummy's splintered head, holds it tightly so it's flush with the torso. His fingers glow golden as golden wires spread across the dummy's neck, slowly stitching the gash closed.

*"Like this," his mother says. "Watch me." Dream's mother's hands spin, golden filaments spreading from her fingertips as she stitches one of their broken bowls back together. The bowl trembles as golden filament spreads across the cracks, solidifying its shape as Dream's mother lowers her hand. "The most important thing is not to be too heavy-handed with this. Especially on more delicate things. Try that cup?"*

*Dream nods, taking the slightly chipped cup into his hands-- his thumb skirts the cut edge of the cup, pulling golden filament to fill the crack. He drops his hand to feel at the edge, finding the healed spot holding firm.*

*“There we go,” Dream’s mother says. “I figure with some more practice, this will become second nature for you. So you can avoid disastrous damage-- like that scar on your back. Where did you tell me you got that from, again?”*

*“Nick did it,” Dream says.*

*“Nick?” Dream’s mother sounds vaguely alarmed. “Well-- I suppose it-- could be far worse.”*

*“He was just playin’ around, I think,” Dream says. “We got it fixed in the medical wing, so it’s not the worst thing in the world.”*

*“Oh? Who fixed it for you?” Dream’s mother raises an eyebrow, looking down at Dream. Dream hums.*

*“Oh, --”*

Dream jolts out of his head, looking down at the dummy. The gash has been sealed, the dummy now back together in one piece.

It reminds him of the crown.

The crown, a reminder of the choice he made, reaching out for George.

Dream lifts up the dummy, rests it against the wall.

He lets himself consider it for a second-- fixate on the new golden marks on its neck, the curved scar like a waning moon. His doing. His rage.

*Stop thinking about it.*

He tears his gaze away from it, squares his shoulders and exhales into the quiet night. Strangely, he



feels relieved-- feels a little better about all of this. He looks down at his hand, flexes his grip ever so slightly.

He hasn't visited home in some time, has he?

*Maybe I should,* Dream thinks as he slams the door to the training barracks behind him. *If we're going to Monitum soon--*

He needs all the luck he can get.

So he resolves himself to it, and heads back for his and George's bedroom.

## Chapter End Notes

EDIT : hi! long time no talk, right? I'm honestly not in a good mental state to update Lucky Charm. it's been a lot of personal stuff that's really been time consuming and has really done a number on me. I'm not sure when the next update will come out, but it will at some point. Thanks for bearing with me.

Thanks for reading! We'll try to do weekly updates from here on out-- but thank you for your patience with this one. I'm honestly quite proud of it. Make sure to leave comments, kudos, share this story with friends if you want. This support has honestly been phenomenal and I really can't thank y'all enough.

Lucky Charm's newest arc is one of my favorites, unparalleled *and* unrivaled, so I hope you all will like it too.

---

Songs I listened to while penning this chapter:

- Funhouse (Run River North: Creatures in Your Head)
- The Four Winds playlist (The Oh Hellos)
- Kiss From a Rose (the Wake Me metal cover)
- Fighter (Jack Stauber)
- Turn Back Time (Derivakat amen :pray:)

---

As always thank you for your support. It really means the most to me and I always smile at your comments and support. It really does mean the world to me.

## Chapter 20

### Chapter Summary

George blinks again, raising an arm over his eyes and lets a low groan escape his lips.

“I’ve got an idea, but I wanted to ask you about it first.”

“Shoot,” George murmurs, his voice still heavy with sleep.

“I think we should visit my parents,” Dream says matter-of-factly.

### Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

George’s sleep is uncomfortably dreamless.

Well, maybe ‘uncomfortable’ is the wrong term to use. His mind is quietly tranquil, absent of comfort or discomfort. It’s just-- quiet. Like a lukewarm blanket, smothering out any hint of a spark but not being enough to keep him warm. He floats in and out of consciousness--

When he finally starts to come to, Dream’s side of the bed feels cold. His fingers ghost over the silken sheets, the soft feeling of loss ebbing through him. He’s not quite sure what to make of that now. George shifts onto his side, hugging the silken sheets close to his body. He wants to fall back asleep, to the lukewarm safety of his unconsciousness.

But it’s not safe there, is it?

*“There’s no way you-- no way you don’t understand how I could care about you. How— how much I do care.”*

George squeezes his eyes shut, a soft whimper leaving his lips as he brings the sheet to his lips, covers his slight sobs.

*I never asked for it.*

*I never asked for your feelings, you care. You thrust all of those upon me-- without even thinking about how I felt-- how I feel--*

But what does he feel?

What does he really think? Is that a conversation that he's even ready to have? Is that a target he'll ever be able to hit?

He doesn't think so.

He'd not been quite sure what to *make* of that whole conversation. Dream didn't look like he wanted to talk about it afterwards-- and after the dust settled, it didn't seem right to talk about it. It didn't feel right to fill the space with a color that he wasn't sure Dream wanted-- with a color that George didn't even know if he wanted to *name*. A color so hopefully dyed grey--

The next sensation he feels is--

*"George."*

It sounds faintly like Dream's voice.

George blinks.

Dream's face is hovering over his own, his breath warm.

"Morning," Dream says. He sounds breathless, as if he's just been up. George blinks again, raising an arm over his eyes and lets a low groan escape his lips. "I've got an idea, but I wanted to ask you about it first."

"Shoot," George murmurs, his voice still heavy with sleep.

"I think we should visit my parents," Dream says matter-of-factly. George rockets up in bed, and immediately collides with Dream. The sound is nearly deafening, and George reaches up a hand to rub at the blossoming pain as Dream groans in tandem.

“What the hell?” George blurts out.

“*I’m* the one who should say that, why did you *hit* me?” Dream snaps in mock-offense. “All I suggested was visiting my parents-- it’s not like I asked you for anything else--”

“I’m not *deaf*, I heard that-- just-- *why* ?” George grumbles as he rubs his knuckles across his eyes. “Why *now* ?”

Dream hums lowly, tapping his fingers against the sheets.

“If we’re heading off to Monitum,” Dream begins, his voice contemplative, “I think I want to bring-- our family’s shield with me. Since it’s a good luck charm or something. I said it once before, but dad always said the thing was-- blessed by Fortuna or something. Maybe it’s worth-- bringing along.”

“We need all the luck we can get?” George says, cocking his head. It’s half-phrased like a question, half-phrased like a general statement.

“Exactly what I thought,” Dream says triumphantly. “But, yeah-- I was thinking we could go and visit. Get some materials. Be out by the end of this week, maybe. I know the regions around Monitum are more-- well, they’re a bit chillier, so I guess you would probably need warmer clothes.”

George nods, toying with the hem of his sleeve.

“Is-- is Eret coming by?” George asks hesitantly. “Maybe I could-- just ask them, or something--”

The door slams open.

“Your Majesty, I can’t *believe* you would just throw my hard work on the ground and just-- *leave* it out there!” Eret sounds near-distraught as they drag in a rack of clothes. “I spent yesterday just trying to get the mud out-- Fortuna, I can’t *believe* this-- my *hands* are all cracked and--” The footsteps stop as Eret takes a look at the situation in front of them. George’s face goes red at Eret’s contemplative gaze and Dream coughs.

“Am I interrupting you two?” Eret asks, though not meanly. “Are you having a moment?”

George puts his head in his hands.

“No, Eret,” Dream says lightly. “We’re just talking. Right, Your Majesty?”

“Mhm,” George says, his tone muffled. He doesn’t *want* a moment, not when he’s so-- not when he’s still-- his heart flutters, and he clasps his hands around its beating wings, tears it away from the light. *Hide it*. Obscure it, don’t *think* about it--

“Well, alright,” Eret says. “I suppose I can’t-- well, I’m not going to ask about what happened-- it seems distressing enough even without my complaining. I’ve got the cape here, but I did hear about your-- expedition towards Monitum through word of mouth. It’s the *talk* of the castle-- the king and his knight, off on an expedition-- it’s got a romantic charm to it, no?”

“I wouldn’t put a romantic twist on it,” Dream laughs. “S’just business.”

*“Are you-- are you fucking serious , George? You really fucking think I only care about you for your position?”*

Is it for appearances or is it because Dream genuinely cares?

Has it all just been a farce since the beginning?

Does *George* deserve to know?

“You ought to be a bit more imaginative,” Eret tsks. “Well, no matter. Your Majesty, I’ve curated a completely new set of clothes-- more practical. I remember you asked me for something more practical at one point-- so what better time to try it out than now?”

George blinks.

Eret takes a bundle of clothes from the rack, setting them on the bed. It’s a plain cotton shirt with dark, high-waisted pants-- far more plain than anything Eret would’ve usually given him-- and as

George reaches to touch the fabric, he's startled to find that it shimmers in his grip. He holds it up, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, the shimmer," Eret says, a note of excitement entering their voice. "I asked Phil for a protection spell I could use. I wove it into the cotton, so it'll keep the fabric intact even if someone tries to slash it. I've got an overcoat for you too, and a warmer cape-- oh, can't forget the boots. They're not high-heeled this time, I made sure to do a flat sole-- but they're nice and warm. A little bird told me it's becoming chillier."

"There's just a lot of little birds everywhere, huh? Always talking," George says, swinging his legs off the bed. "Thank you, Eret. I appreciate it."

Eret beams.

"No problem, Your Majesty. I'll be off now-- but I hope you enjoy the clothes." Eret bows dramatically, taking the cart out of the room before closing the door behind them. George fumbles with the fabric of the cotton shirt, rolling it in his hands. It's far nicer-- far smoother than he'd expected it to be. The craftsmanship on it is undeniable-- some of the finest he's ever seen. His hand glides across it, nearly as smooth as silk.

His own dark grey tunic feels a bit scratchier now, clinging to his skin in ways that he hadn't ever noticed before--

He unties the collar, tugging open the strings with his index finger.

Dream's gaze is fixated on him. George feels the tips of his ears heat up at the gaze-- as if Dream is trying to memorize him, *map* him for some unknown purpose--

*Do you want to forget that happened?*

Forget.

*Forget it.*

...

“Some privacy?” George prompts. “Dream?”

“... shit, sorry,” Dream blurts out. “Y-yeah.” Dream gets up from beside the bed, heads out the door. “When you’re ready-- we’ll head off to my old house. It’s not far.”

“Kay,” George murmurs, and shucks off his shirt, slipping on the new garment Eret tailored. It feels as soft as he expected it to be just from the glance of his hand-- nearly like silk, if it wasn’t for the fact that it had a bit of give, a bit of *weight* that he’s sure silk doesn’t have. He laces up the collar, slips on the high-waisted pants. It feels-- less restricting.

Like he could *run* forever in these. It’s a strange feeling, to feel so *free* .

He picks up the overcoat.

It’s a dull bluish hue-- he’s not quite sure what the true tone is, but it seems-- far more understated than any of Eret’s previous works. It’s *nice*, almost-- he can’t quite shake the unsettling feeling-- something about the way he looks right now reminds him of his old self-- a self that he *almost* doesn’t recognize anymore. It reminds him too much of the past, of a life before the pomp and circumstance of fanciful silks and body-conforming shirts. He shrugs on the overcoat, letting it fall over his shoulders. It’s almost like the clothing itself exhales as it settles on him.

“Alright,” George murmurs, mostly for his own ears. He straightens his back, tries to drop his shoulders-- before heading out the bedroom door, stopping a little to see Dream with his arms folded behind him, awkwardly scraping his foot against the ground in wait.

“Oh, George,” Dream says. “Uh-- you look--”

“Is it that bad?” George asks, raising an eyebrow. Dream’s laugh is somewhat subdued, and George watches as he raises his hand to the back of his neck, rubs at the skin.

“No,” Dream says. “Just-- you look nice.”

It bears some kind of weight that George wasn’t expecting it to have.

It isn't the first time Dream's said this, and it certainly won't be the last-- but George can't quite shake the feeling that something in it was laced with feelings a tad more genuine, more withheld. Yet, at the same time, it felt like that certain *something* was actively attempting to be stamped out, rather than left to flourish.

Maybe it's because of everything that's happened over the past few days. How all of it has warped his perception *of* Dream-- but the compliment sinks into him, weighs down on him unevenly. It doesn't-- it almost doesn't feel right. The silence feels charged as George tries to grapple with the compliment--

"... George, you good?"

George's face flushes as he snaps out of a trance he didn't even know he was in--

"I, yeah, 'course," George mumbles, clearing his throat quietly. "Thanks. Glad I-- don't look bad. Uh, anyways-- y-you were saying-- your parents' house?"

"Oh, yeah, uh-- it's, by this, um... it's by this lake, on the palace grounds. It's a bit of a walk-- but I think we could probably get there faster by horse, if-- if you wanted," Dream offers. George shakes his head immediately.

"I-- I think I've had enough of horses-- for a while," George mumbles. "So-- walking it is."

"Walking it is," Dream echoes. "You should probably take the cape, too-- it's getting colder, don't want you to freeze."

"It's not *that* cold," George grumbles, though he picks up the cape that Eret laid out-- the cape feels lightweight, almost luxurious in feel with a thick fur lining. George runs his hand across the lining, sinking his fingers into the fur. It *feels* warm enough as it settles around his shoulders. It's surprisingly more insulating than what it looks like at first glance--

Dream gives George a satisfied once-over.

"Yeah-- that looks better. C'mon, let's go," Dream says. George nods, following alongside Dream



as they exit the palace in what seems to be close to no time at all. George can't help but focus on the way his clothes shift comfortably against his skin, smooth as can possibly be. He can't help but instinctually shift to straighten his back, hold himself up as he did with the more restrictive clothing--

It feels so much more *free* , and yet--

And yet he doesn't quite know how to deal with that sense of newfound freedom.

The day is somewhat chilly, though not that bad. It spreads tingles throughout George's body, causing the hair at the back of his neck to stand up on end-- but it's not bad. None of this is *bad*, just--

Just different.

He's not sure whether it's a good different or a bad different.

Well, he's not in the business of thinking too much about it now, honestly. Dream seems to be in a good mood, humming as a faint wind picks up, stinging at George's cheeks. He squints a little against the cold front, and he hears Dream laugh faintly at his pinched expression. They walk like that in silence, with only the sound of faint birdsong sporadically splitting open the whistling wind.

It's easier to focus on sensation than on thinking-- easier to focus on the *feeling* of it all.

They stop in front of a lakeside house.

It's a humble thing, built of dark spruce logs and planks and cobblestone bricks. The doors look well-worn, the handles' matte finish having been burnished by countless hands' opening and closing it. The house is something that feels— so, so *Dream* that it stifles George's breath. Dream gestures about it as if to say, *This is it*.

“Welcome to MY house,” Dream enunciates.

George snickers.

“It’s a nice house,” George says. “I like it.”

Dream beams.

George tries not to let his heart squeeze.

“Well,” Dream says. “Let’s go in?”

George nods wordlessly, and Dream moves up the steps to the entrance of the house— he raps against the worn spruce surface. *Tap. Tap. Tap.*

Pause.

“Can’t you just go in unannounced?” George asks, raising an eyebrow. “It’s YOUR house, after all.”

“Well, I— I said I hadn’t been home in awhile,” Dream mumbles. “Maybe me entering would give my mom a heart attack. She’s getting up there in years— oh. Sorry, I—” Dream’s gaze turns more conflicted, and his teeth come to bite at his lower lip, worrying it a little. George rolls his eyes.

“Just because my mom’s dead doesn’t mean I don’t wanna hear about yours, *sheesh*,” George chides. “M’ not *that* fragile.”

“... Okay,” Dream says in a tone that sounds far too unconvinced for George’s liking.

“Hey, what’s that supposed t—” George starts before the door slams open.

“*DREAM!*” a voice crows. “*There* you are!” A bundle of energy slams into Dream’s side, nearly toppling him off the porch of the house. “Mom’s been asking when you’d visit next, you *dick*. ” George blinks *hard* to see a girl with blond hair hugging at Dream’s side, her golden-colored eyes glittering with mirth.

Dream groans comically, ruffling the girl's hair.

"Sorry, kid, *duty* calls," Dream says softly. "I have a new job."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," the girl huffs, crossing her arms. "Bad came over at one point— told us all about it. Same with Techno. Said we should be honored that the *prodigal son* has now become the king's personal *si* — bodyguard."

"*Hey*. Hey. I'm your *brother*, don't make fun of me," Dream splutters.

"It's because you're such a loser," Dream's... sister huffs. "Who's this?" Her gaze shifts up to George now, her eyes curious and pointed. George feels a subtle heat tinge his face. "What's the matter with him? Cat got his tongue?"

"Drista, go easy on him," Dream chides. "You're a lot to handle at first gl—"

"I am *not*," Drista complains. "Literally no one says that but you. Now *answer* the question." Drista's gaze fixes back on George, and she places her hands squarely on her hips. "Who are you and why are you with my brother?"

"Uh—" George falters. "I'm... the king."

"*Huh?*"

Drista's eyes go wide.

"Wait, no way— *you're* the king? I thought the king was some creepy old guy who drank a lot," Drista says. "Unless— unless you *are* him? Did you get a new haircut or something? Maybe polished up your image or— or something like that?"

"No, no," George says immediately, raising his hands. "We-- we're not... the same person. I'm the new king. Because uh, the old king-- died."

“Oh? He did that?” Drista asks. “He just-- up and at it, died?”

“I-- yeah,” Dream adds. “People-- people do that.”

“... Sounds fake, but alright,” Drista snickers. Her face sobers up a little and she places her hands more firmly on her hips, a low hum leaving her lips. “I guess I should tell mom you’re here. She’s out in the garden grabbin’ food. Why are you guys here, anyway?”

“I was planning on fetching the shield,” Dream explains.

“That old thing?” Drista asks, gesturing to Dream and George to step further into the house. “Why bother? Dad wouldn’t let you take it away. Remember when we used it to go sledding? He was *mad* mad.”

“I mean, yeah, ‘course I remember *that* . I think dad will understand this time, though-- it’s work-related,” Dream says as they cross the threshold into the house. “Where is he, anyways?”

“Hunting, you know the drill,” Drista says as she heads deeper into the house. “I think he’ll be back soon though.”

George tries to take it all in-- the house is plainly furbished-- chairs and a table made of roughly hewn wood. The wooden textures are smoothed over with thousands of fingerprints, cushions with fabric so worn and frayed that the packed cotton leaks through the stitched lines. The dining table has a simple vase with fresh flowers decorating its center, a faded and well-used tablecloth spread upon it. It’s all so--

It feels like a home that has had time to be *lived* in.

It feels like--

Pure love, almost.

George is surprised by the notion, but the feeling quickly leaves as he hears Dream step across the house. Dream moves towards the dining table, running his hand across its wooden surface as if

attempting to familiarize himself with it again. He looks like he *fits* here.

“*Mom!* Dream’s visiting with the *kiiiiing*,” Drista shouts into the room. There’s the sound of rapid footsteps as a woman steps out from the back of the house carrying a hand-woven basket, her hair windswept and her gaze a mixture of pleasantly surprised and far too excited. George’s surprised by just how much she-- looks like *Dream*.

Well, that’s how family works, right?

Maybe he shouldn’t be as surprised as he is.

“You’re *back*,” Dream’s mother says breathlessly. “What brings you back here? And with the *king*, no less?” Dream’s mother’s gaze shifts towards George, her gaze still that mixture of surprise and excitement, the firmest sense of *love* and care in her gaze. George swallows, reaching up a hand to rub at the back of his neck in self-consciousness.

“I came back to get something,” Dream says softly.

“You *wound* me, Dream,” Dream’s mother sighs dramatically. “My dear son, who *never* visits home, only comes back for a *service* and not to reunite with his family. I thought I raised you better than that.”

“No, yeah, what’s up with that? Mom’s right,” Drista huffs. “It’s *been* a few months, and you come back just for that? Your job’s more important than just ‘quality family time’?”

“Hey, *hey*, don’t gang up on me!” Dream protests, raising his hands. “I can only get away with this because it’s work-related.”

Dream’s mother rolls her eyes good-naturedly, setting the basket on the dining room table. Upon a closer inspection, the basket is filled with a mixture of herbs and vegetables-- probably the last of the crop before the bitter cold made it too hard to harvest anything.

“Mhm, *sure*, honey,” Dream’s mother lilts teasingly. “What did you need from the house? Surely not another sword like last time?”

“Huh, no,” Dream protests. “I was-- I’m here to get the old shield. You know, the one that dad always says is the ‘relic of Fortuna’.”

Dream’s mother cocks her head, running a hand through her hair with a confused glance.

“Wait, but-- oh, your dad wouldn’t let you take it away. You remember that winter when you two took it sledding-- he *grounded* you for a month! Aren’t there better shields in the palace, anyhow?” she asks, crossing her arms with an increasingly-perplexed look.

*The resemblance is there*, George decides. It’s in the slight furrowing of Dream’s mother’s brow, the way she seems to rock against her feet when Dream stutters through a half-hearted answer. George’s seen that look on Dream several times as he stands and waits for George to hurry up or as he tries his best not to zone out.

George isn’t quite sure how he feels about that.

“Yeah, right? I said the same thing and this loser told me that it’d be something for work,” Drista complains.

“Don’t call your brother a loser, even if it’s kind of true,” Dream’s mom chides as she runs her hand affectionately across Drista’s head. “But what could you possibly need the shield for?” She gasps. “You aren’t going into battle, are you? That couldn’t-- possibly be it, could it? There hasn’t been a war for hundreds of ye--”

“No, no, no,” Dream stammers out. “No, that’s not it. I was just-- I thought I’d take it as a good luck charm. There’s not gonna be anything-- dangerous out there. Promise.”

Dream’s mother seems to loosen considerably at that.

“Okay, good,” she says. “Good. Well, when your father comes back from gathering firewood, tell him all about it.”

“Wait-- he’s gathering firewood? Why’d he tell me he was hunting, then?” Drista mock-accuses.

“It’s because gathering firewood is the boring grown-up business, and hunting gets your brain

turning, isn't it?" Dream teases. "You're just easily impressionable."

"How *dare* you!" Drista shouts. "Right in front of the *king* ?! How can you *live* with yourself like that, what kind of a *brother* humiliates his sister right in front of a *government official* , no, *THE* government--"

"The *only* one you *have*! " Dream responds. "What would you *do* without me--"

George snickers, raising a hand to cover his mouth as Dream and Drista's bickering grows louder. Dream's mother sighs good-naturedly, leaning in conspiratorially.

"They'll be at it for awhile," she says. "Can I get you something to drink? Tea, maybe? Would that be too plain for you, Your Majesty?"

"Uh-- no, that's-- that would be nice," George says awkwardly. Dream's mother smiles, the corners of her eyes crinkling in that painfully subtle way-- it makes something in George's heart squeeze uncomfortably as she heads for the small kitchen-- it's more finely furnished than the one in George's house-- but just as worn. The signs of a house well-lived, well- *loved* .

There must be *thousands* of stories to tell behind everything.

If George had the time to listen to the stories the walls transcribe, he thinks he'd listen to them all day.

Dream's mother sets down an ornate teapot against the table as well as two teacups. The teapot's gold detailing feels-- almost warmer, in a way. Faint vine-like shapes crawl across the teapot, curling and blooming against the pale porcelain. George's sure he can't see the true color, and he raises a hand to feel at the golden detailing, tracing the shapes.

"Do you like it?" Dream's mother's voice is gentle. George's thumb rests against the raised gold detailing, a low uhm leaving his lips.

"It's pretty," George says. "Reminds me of-- home."

The vine-like shapes almost--

“Oh, it was an old gift from a friend,” Dream’s mother says. “The rose gold etchings are my favorite part of this.” Dream’s mother raises a hand to feel at the porcelain teapot as well, her eyes softening. “The effect’s created using an old technique of binding broken objects back together-- but I think it really makes this pot special.”

George hums. He supposes he understands that-- in the same way that the old crown was pulled together--

It’s been awhile since he even thought of it. That heirloom crown, pulled together with gold and pure will. Everything in this house *reminds* him of Dream; he can almost make out Dream living, *breathing*, growing in this house. It’s strange, almost.

“It does,” George says softly. “I... really like it.”

Dream’s mother laughs as she lifts the pot, pouring tea into one of the porcelain cups.

“You’re not one of many words, are you?” Dream’s mother asks kindly. “Or well, maybe you are. We’ve only just met, after all.” She sets the teapot back down, holding out one of the cups to George. He takes it, splay his fingers across the rim of the delicate cup. The edges are faintly raised, covered in the same rose gold detailing as the teapot. George lifts the cup to his lips, takes a tentative sip of the tea. It’s flowery, almost. Almost fruity in flavor.

“Hibiscus,” Dream’s mother clarifies. George watches as she toys with the rim of her own cup, drumming her fingers against it as she takes a sip. It’s a move so--

*Dream’s really her spitting image, huh*, George thinks.

“I suppose that’s because he’s my son,” Dream’s mother says, a light laugh leaving her lips. George’s face flushes.

“Did I-- did I say that out loud?” George stammers. Dream’s mother laughs, nearly wheezing as she sets her cup down. “S-sorry, I--”

“It’s nothing to *apologize* for,” Dream’s mother chides gently. “It’s a slip of the tongue.” Her gaze



shifts to Dream and Drista, still bickering away at each other. Dream's currently got a hand against Drista's head, pushing her away as she ineffectually tries to slam into him. "They're funny, aren't they? They've always been like this, even when they were young."

"Oh?" George asks, a light laugh leaving his lips. "That makes sense."

"He got into a lot of trouble when he was younger-- I remember he went outside in the dark of night to 'train' at one point-- but he couldn't have been older than five at the time-- I remember catching him in the dark covered in the dirt-- I'd been really worried at the time," Dream's mother sighs. "But I suppose that interest paid off-- given that he's your knight now, right?"

"I-- I guess, yeah," George says softly. He can almost see it-- see a younger Dream covered in dirt holding a small wooden sword. It's--

It's strange, thinking about it. George raises a hand to ruffle at his hair, lowering it to fumble with the furred collar of his cape. He doesn't want to *think* about the possibility of having *missed* out on seeing Dream when he was younger--

"I'm glad to have seen him find a place where he's more comfortable," Dream's mother says softly. "I was worried about him for a bit. Especially when he was younger-- he seemed scattered. Almost lost, in a way. It'd come out of nowhere-- he's always had an idea of what he wanted, of what he was going to do-- it was strange seeing that suddenly melt when he was growing up. It's back now, but-- it was odd-- at the time, at least."

"Oh," George murmurs. That's the best he can say, isn't it? Just-- *oh*.

The front door suddenly swings open as a man steps through, carrying a giant load of firewood. The familial resemblance is there immediately-- Dream really *is* his father's spitting image-- in looks, at least. George *really* isn't sure how to think about that-- does the fact that Dream seems to be the coalescing of his family's *best* make it easier to deal with him-- or worse?

Honestly, as George watches Dream laugh and tease Drista again and *again*, he can't help but feel terribly fond.

There's just a part of him that can't help but *want* it even if he shouldn't. Because he'd *said* it was a hassle, he'd *said* it wasn't *worth* loving him, and yet-- and *yet* he can't even withhold it from Dream. He can't hide his own heart-- can't hide the way that it now beats so painfully in his chest--

-

“Dad!” Drista screeches. “Dream’s bullying me--”

“So, what, a normal Tuesday?” Dream’s father chuckles good-naturedly as he deposits the firewood onto the floor. “Good to see that you’ve come back for a visit, Dream.” Dream’s father ruffles Dream’s hair roughly, a light laugh leaving his lips. “And you brought a visitor.” Dream’s father’s gaze shifts to George, an inquisitive look on his face. “S’this your boyfriend, Dream? And you’ve never bothered to tell us you *had* one?”

George takes a spit take from his tea, coughing raucously as he sets the cup down and wipes his mouth. Dream immediately starts stuttering out a,

“ *Dad* , it’s not-- he’s not my--”

“Yeah, no, we’re--”

“We--” Dream takes a deep breath. “We aren’t boyfriends. We’re not *dating*. That’s the *king*. Don’t be ridiculous.” Dream’s face flushes subtly, and George can’t help but almost feel-- forlorn? Is that the name for what he’s feeling? Does he *want* Dream to entertain the possibility of-- no. No, no. He can’t be thinking about that right now. He shouldn’t be thinking about that at all. Not when he’d asked Dream to put his feelings aside for-- for *his* selfish sake.

“Hmm,” Dream’s father says. “Well, alright. And-- huh. New king? I wasn’t aware. I suppose Fortuna likes being a little secretive like that, hm?” Dream’s father cocks his head, his eyes glimmering with mirth. “I hear the last one was quite the nasty man. Honestly, when I heard about that plan of yours-- to supply materials and resources to other towns in Fortuna-- I was quite *shocked*, you see. The old king did nothing but really-- flatter *himself* with the kingship. I’d had my suspicions ever since that announcement that Fortuna was under new management. I’m glad it’s you.”

Dream’s father grins, the corners of his eyes crinkling up warmly. George laughs nervously, rubbing at the back of his neck, tugging up the fur lining of his cape.

“Well, thanks,” George murmurs.

Dream’s father laughs now, that same half-wheeze half-chuckle as the rest of Dream’s family.

“All that aside-- what brings you two here?” Dream’s father asks, leaning his weight against his foot, rocking back and forth a little. The floorboards creak ever so faintly under his weight, and George exchanges a glance with Dream.

“Well, I was thinking,” Dream starts. “Me and His Majesty are going on-- an expedition, somewhere a bit farther out-- I was going to ask if it was okay for me to borrow Fortuna’s shield. As-- as a good luck charm.”

Dream’s father hums lowly. He stays silent for a moment in almost awkward silence, and Dream swallows.

“I know that you don’t want that shield to come to harm, especially because it’s a gift from Fortuna-- and you don’t have to say yes,” Dream says quickly. “I know that thing means a lo--”

“... Go ahead,” Dream’s father says. “I suppose we’ve kept that thing isolated for far too long, huh?”

Dream blinks.

“Huh?” Dream asks, his tone incredulous.

“I’ll let you have it,” Dream’s father says, nodding a little as he heads towards the back of the house, towards a large oak cabinet. The cabinet is old, clear signs of aging across its wooden boards. And yet, a fine layer of dust seems to be ingrained into the wood, signs of it having never been opened. Dream’s father twists open the handles, pulling the doors open. “I suppose the thing about objects is--”

Dream’s father reaches for a shield wrapped in black velour, pulling the fabric off its surface.

“They get a bit sad when you don’t use them, huh? They get a bit weaker, a bit frailer when you don’t let them utilize their full potential.”

Dream’s father drops the fabric onto the dining table, letting the shield gleam.

George supposes he understands now, why Dream's father referred to it as the blessing of Fortuna.

It's a beautiful thing, even when he can't perceive its full color.

He's heard his mother speak of mother-of-pearl. Of a shining material with endless iridescence. And as Dream's father brings the shield to the light, he can see it. The white material flickers in the sunlight, shifting into shimmering blue and golden yellow, and muddier colors that he can't truly perceive-- and for a moment, he wishes he *could*, wishes he could see this shield in its pure glory. Across its edges are golden details, twisting into the clover shape of the Kingdom of Fortuna's insignia.

Dream's father runs his hand across the edge, almost reverently as he places the shield into Dream's hands. Dream lifts it, as if in awe of it all--

"Take good care of it," Dream's father says softly. "No more *roughhousing* with it."

"Come on now, that was a *one time* thing," Dream complains, lowering the shield. His gaze fixates on the shield, and George tries *very* hard not to look at Dream's lashes as he stares down. (It doesn't really work. George's breath catches in his throat as Dream blinks, lets his lashes catch the light.) "I'll bring it back when we come back. Thank you, dad. I mean it."

"No problem," Dream's father says, patting Dream on the back. "You don't have to bring it back. I guess we've kept it in the house for too long-- it would've had to see the light eventually. Give it a good time."

Dream laughs now, picking up the velour fabric to wrap the shield up.

"That sounds weird," Dream snickers. "Who says that about *objects* anyways?" As Dream raises the fabric, George feels himself step forward, rest his hand on Dream's. He *feels* Dream's breath hitch, but he can't be bothered to care. He wants to *feel* this shield himself, wants to map out its features--

"Your Majesty?" Dream's voice is very soft. Far too soft.

George is painfully aware they are in Dream's house, surrounded by Dream's family-- but he can't

be bothered to care when his own curiosity bubbles too close to the surface. He can almost feel Drista's eyes boring into the back of his head as he holds onto her brother's hand, his touch feather-light as he tries not to startle Dream too badly.

"Can I--" George's voice is equally soft, near tremulous. "I want to take a look. At the shield. I'll wrap it up when I'm done."

"Oh, of-of course," Dream murmurs. "Yeah, go ahead. I-- yeah, um--" Dream surrenders the shield, lets George take most of its weight.

It's-- surprisingly lightweight, and as George runs his fingers across the mother-of-pearl surface, he's surprised at just how *light* it really is. At how smooth it all is. It's a shield with no battle damage to its frame, perfectly intact.

George runs his fingers across the clover insignia, lets his fingers run over--

*Hm?*

George squints a little--

Beneath the clover is the tiniest Roman numeral inscription--

*VII.*

He's not too sure what it means, but-- it's so small it's nearly undetectable. A small detail in this intricate shield, an almost picturesque representation *of* Fortuna. It feels almost right-- like it's *his* shield to hold. George runs his fingers across it again, across the smooth mother-of-pearl surface. It's faintly cool and pleasant, an almost tranquil feeling.

Then Drista coughs.

George's face flushes as he's finally reminded of what he's here for-- why he'd offered to even feel the stupid shield in the first place. He lifts up the velour fabric from the dining table, wraps the shield in it with as much precision as possible, lifting it off the table to hold it at his side.

“Uh, shall we... head off?” George asks Dream quietly. Dream’s face is somewhat transfixed, almost enraptured *by* George-- but he snaps out of it as soon as George speaks. He nods, giving George a hesitant grin.

“Yeah, of course. Thanks, once again-- I promise we’re not gonna break it or anything,” Dream says, turning to his father with a grin.

“I know you won’t. That thing’s worth more than any of us,” Dream’s father says, chuckling a little. George laughs too, despite himself-- and as he moves towards the door, away from this place-- he hears Dream’s mother call out.

“Your Majesty, it’s been-- very nice meeting you, but I’m sure you’d understand us wanting some privacy to bid our son farewell?” She looks kindly, flexing her fingers a little as she waits for George’s reaction. George nods, shouldering the shield over his back.

“Oh-- oh, yes, of course. I’ll-- just be outside then. Take your time, Dream,” George says softly. Dream gives George an affirming nod, his gaze softening as he turns to his family. It’s strange, George thinks, as he crosses the boundary and leaves the house. It’s about midday now-- the blue sky spreads broadly across the sky with cirrus clouds spread through the air like torn cotton strands.

As he watches the clouds flutter, break apart in the wind--

He can’t help but keep thinking about the way Dream’s face softened when talking with his family. The way his eyes were full of reassurance, kindness, even playful mirth-- his voice, the way it’d been that even, measured tone he reserved for talking to George, to Sapnap-- the way in which his hands shifted so evenly, held so *firmly* to the things he loved, *loves* --

Something about that--

It feels so *warm*.

It feels like a thousand words, a myriad of admissions coalescing in one touch. It feels like a powerful, *burning* warmth— like the crackling of a life-giving hearth, a fire so brilliant that you would steal it from the gods to glance even a second of its warmth, its comfort.

It feels like pure *devotion* , the way Dream's feelings ebb out of everything he does. The way that Dream *loves* unconditionally. *Loves* full heartedly.

It feels like a declaration of *everything* George reaches out for, desperately *hungers* for.

It's a warmth that George has never known, and yet—

And yet now that he knows, he doesn't know how he'll ever go without it.

It's love.

It's love, isn't it? Plain and simple—

George's hands shake. He looks down at them, tries to clench them to stop the trembling— why is he so fucking *scared*? Is this fear he's feeling? Fear of the inadmissible truth that he *wants* love? That he *wants* this feeling, this secret warmth to stay? That he *wants* it even if he thinks he's not worthy of it? That he may *never* be?

*Dream didn't care.*

*He didn't care that I thought that it was all—*

*All a waste, because he— he loved me.*

“George? You alright?”

George startles out of his funk, turning to see a slightly-frazzled Dream step out of the house. His face seems flushed and his hair nervously ruffled. He seems somewhat bothered by something, though George can't be bothered to ask-- not when Dream's thoroughly rattled his brain by just-- being *Dream*.

George laughs, rubbing at his face. It feels hot.

He hopes Dream hasn't noticed the flush yet. Hasn't noticed that his mind is *racing* despite all of this--

"Yeah, I'm alright," George murmurs. "How about you?"

"Oh, you know me," Dream responds, though his voice sounds a bit less convinced. "I'm doing great. S'just-- family's a lot, you know? C'mon, let's get on the road. I wanna get back to the castle and start preparing."

"Okay," George hums, slinging the shield more securely across his back. He hums again, lower this time-- trying to just-- let his mind settle. It's racing even so, unable to be quieted properly. "Speaking of family-- they call you Dream?"

"Well," Dream starts, moving down the path as he speaks, "My mom came up with it. The rest of the family just kinda-- picked up on it, I guess. Feels weird even being referred to with my real name now, honestly. But I like being called Dream. It's nice."

"Huh," George says, following close behind. "Makes sense, I suppose."

"Yeah," Dream says. He pauses. "They mean a lot to me."

"I can tell," George responds.

He pauses, too, wondering what exactly to say. The birds chirp overhead, arcing into the sky. It's nearly tranquil, a peaceful feeling ebbing through his veins. It's-- it's all nice. Far too nice, George thinks, for the chaos of these past few days.

"You really love them, don't you?"

Dream laughs, the tone endlessly soft. George's heart crinkles at the seams-- something about the way Dream *looks* right now-- content and happy in *loving*, as if everything *in* Dream is dedicated to that-- that tenderness nearly makes George want to cry.



“Of course,” Dream says. “They’re family. I try to show how much I care. In everything, I guess.” He pauses, tonguing at his cheek. “C’mon. Let’s go-- we still have a long way to go.” He steps forward, into the day-- he turns, beckoning George to walk forward, and George can’t help but be *pulled* towards him.

In a way, he thinks he’s always been chasing.

And now that he *knows* that Dream may as well be love-- may as well *breathe* that in everything he does--

George wonders how he’ll hold up in the days to come. In the months knowing that he *wants* that feeling--

But he’ll swallow it down. Swallow down his feelings, his desires-- because it’s the least he can do, after asking the same of Dream. He’ll stifle the new sensation of burning in his heart-- a burning that he’d only ever realized was *there* because it’d started to leave scars, littered across his very being.

He’ll make it through.

Because he *has* to.

## Chapter End Notes

hey! long time no see, everyone;; but i'm back now with a new chapter :] this one's a bit shorter, trying to get back into the swing of writing. there was a lot of personal stuff that happened that really dampened my mood and for a time i was genuinely feeling the most awful i'd ever felt. but most of that's behind us now and i'm on spring break, so hopefully I'll be down to write and update more frequently. no guarantees on that, though;; so maybe a chapter once every two weeks?

anyways, we're still getting into my favorite arc, so-- stay tuned!

--

songs i listened to while penning this chapter:

- goodbye sengen (chinozo)
- royals & wine (hidden tapes- catharsis)
- utopiosphere (mili- deemo vol.1)

--

Thank you for your continued support and love of Lucky Charm. It's really meant a lot to me and you guys are the reason why I'm so motivated to continue writing :]  
And thank you for your patience most of all. I hope to keep producing content that y'all will enjoy.

## End Notes

Please do not contact the cc's about this fic in donos, tags, etc. Please adhere to proper social conventions and keep fandom-related things to the fandom.

Find me on Twitter as @kath\_trashh and on Instagram as @kath\_trash

Credit to Cal for the initial idea for the AU; find them on @sleepytime\_cal on Twitter and Instagram.

Works inspired by this [one](#) [Don't Shoot The Messenger!](#) by [whoopswheresmyusername](#)

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!